Approaches and Methodologies
As the characteristics of intercultural education outlined in chapter two make clear, the approaches and methodologies that are particularly suitable for an intercultural approach are those that use active learning strategies, in particular the use of discussion. This chapter, and the subsequent exemplars, identify how active learning methodologies can be applied across a range of subject areas in the post-primary classroom.

**ACTIVE LEARNING**

The real voyage in discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.  
(Marcel Proust)

Today, active learning approaches are firmly rooted in post-primary teaching and are central to the successful delivery of a most subjects. Active learning is a process in which students actively participate in their learning in a variety of ways. This increases the possibility that students will internalise what they have learned and be able to apply it to their day-to-day lives and to everyday situations. This makes active learning crucial to the development of responsible global citizenship.

**Active learning**

- engages students physically, cognitively and emotionally
- places students at the centre of the learning process through ensuring that the content is relevant to their own lives and is engaging for them
- promotes responsibility, confidence and self-esteem as students become responsible for their own learning
- acknowledges that students learn from each other and teachers learn from students, as well as vice versa

Approaches and Methodologies

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace...

(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26.)
allows for flexibility of teaching methodologies and so accommodates different kinds of intelligence and different learning styles
• builds skills of problem-solving, critical thinking and co-operation
• requires an atmosphere of trust and support in order to ensure that students do engage and feel secure in expressing their own views or in trying out new skills
• promotes action, as students learn to recognise their own capacity and self-efficacy.

In approaching concepts like the value of diversity or rights and responsibilities, or in learning skills such as negotiated solutions to conflict it is often useful to utilise real-life situations within the learning process. The active learning methodologies outlined in the exemplars which support these guidelines (available on the CD-ROM and at www.ncca.ie) offer a range of ideas for doing this. Clearly, there are times when fraught emotions make this difficult. The section on dealing with controversial issues at the end of this chapter might be useful in such situations.

Active learning methods

Structured discussion

Discussion has a key role in intercultural education. It provides a chance for students to talk about their ideas and feelings and can open up opportunities for developing or changing their ideas or feelings where appropriate. It can develop a range of skills such as asking questions, active and positive listening, taking turns, summarising views, etc.

Crucial to engaging in open discussion is an atmosphere of trust and support. Students need to feel that they can speak their mind. While students should be confronted about inaccurate, hurtful or hostile statements, this should be done in such a way that they are affirmed as a person, while their view is challenged.

It is not a good idea to throw open a discussion without first providing some guidance and ground rules for discussion. It is also the teacher’s role to provide a suitable stimulus for generating discussion, such as a poem, newspaper article, piece of music, visual stimulus or physical activity.

A sample set of ground rules might include

• everyone is shown respect
• everyone is given a chance to speak in the group
• everyone is listened to – no interruptions
• no put-downs
• everyone’s right to their opinion is respected
• everyone is expected to back up their opinion
• everyone has the freedom to change their opinion based on reflective discussion
• no generalisations e.g. ‘all refugees are... all Muslims are...’.

Adapted from Changing Perspectives: Cultural Diversity and Equality in Ireland and the Wider World (A resource for CSPE) 2002, CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit.

Simulation games and role-play

Simulation games and role-play are widely used to provide students with a chance to ‘live out’ a real life situation in a safe environment. For effective role-playing there is need for careful preparation, including preparation of role-cards, reflection questions and any relevant background information. It is important to choose a theme that is clearly focused and
is likely to generate worthwhile reflection, analysis and debate. Allowing sufficient time to bring students out of role and to discuss their experience of role-play is vital. Finally, teachers should respect student’s choice not to participate in a role-play. In such cases they can play an important role in actively listening and reporting on what they observed.

**Debate**

A debate works best is students are given a chance to debate a topic that is of genuine interest to them and if they are given time and support to prepare for the debate (background information, newspaper/magazine articles, useful websites, etc.) One of the pitfalls of classroom debates is the tendency amongst students to rigidly take up a position and not see the value of the alternative view. One approach which may help in this situation is to invite students to research and present a point of view on an issue, then switch sides and argue for the opposite point of view. Finally, the group tries to come to a consensus on the issues and writes a group report describing the issue and their combined thinking about it. The process requires students to make use of collaborative skills, and perspective taking and consensus are built into the procedure.

A walking debate is another good way of allowing students to debate an issue. According to this method, a statement is read out to the class and they are asked to position themselves at one end of the class room if they agree and at the other end if they disagree. Those who are uncertain can stand in the middle. According as the issue is debated students can move their position. The movement encourages opinions to change and also allows for uncertainty and an acceptance that all issues are not black and white.

**Issue tracking**

Issue tracking is a method by which students can follow and explore an issue or topic that is currently in the news. In the context of intercultural education it might be interesting to track the depiction of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland or the issue of religious practice and religious diversity in Ireland. Issue tracking develops group work and cooperation skills as students must work in groups and decide on the best way to collect information. The teacher can stimulate the search by bringing newspapers to class on the first day or by showing a news report on the chosen issue. Students can compile a scrap book, or wall chart or use the internet and computer to compile an electronic scrap-book. This methodology allows for discussion on the difference between fact and opinion and the role of perspective and bias in the media.

**Photos, artwork and images**

An image or photo can be a useful way of stimulating interest in a topic, especially if the image is slightly puzzling or challenging. Students can be invited to question the photo. Who took it? Where was it taken? What was happening at the time the photo was taken? What happened next? etc. It is important to avoid using images that may reinforce students’ prejudices or stereotypes.

Students can also be invited to depict their own understanding of an issue through artwork, cartoons, collage or sculpture. It is important to reassure students that everyone’s efforts are of value including those who are not ‘good at art’.

The use of freeze-frame can be another effective way of using images to explore different experiences, perspectives and feelings. To do this the teacher might read
a poem or a story and then ask the students in small groups to pick one line from the story and create a still image showing what is happening at that moment. When the teacher places his/her hand on a student’s shoulder they are encouraged to verbalise their thoughts in character. The range of attitudes and thoughts that emerge can be the subject for rich discussion.

Survey/questionnaire

A survey or questionnaire can develop skills of communication, gathering and interpreting information and cooperation. It enables action beyond the classroom and can often involve the school or wider community.

DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

All educators can find themselves dealing with controversial issues in the classroom. Issues of justice and morality, of human rights and responsibility, of belief and practice, of life and its meaning, are at the heart of all education. Therefore, controversial issues are encountered almost daily in the classroom. These issues are controversial because there is no one fixed or universally held point of view. A controversial issue is defined as an area of inquiry about which people can hold sincere conflicting points of view. There are often diverse religious as well as secular perspectives on such issues.

Because issues are controversial they are likely to challenge students' values, beliefs, and world views. This can be very threatening and may even cause distress to some students. Therefore when controversial issues are addressed in the classroom teachers need special skills to ensure a positive outcome.

An important outcome in teaching about such controversial material would be to achieve a classroom atmosphere in which students engage in interesting and informed dialogues, free to express their opinions and relate their experiences, yet remaining respectful of both other students and other opinions.

Achieving a balance of ‘freedom within structure’ is not easy, and discomfort can result if the balance between the two is lost. This can arise from a too-tightly-controlled classroom in which students are afraid to speak or a too-loosely-controlled classroom in which unchecked or uninformed personal opinion monopolise class time. This section offers some guidelines for facilitating discussion to achieve this balance.

Some tips for teaching controversial issues

The following tips are aimed at helping teachers keep control of the situation while maintaining open enquiry and dialogue.

Make your classroom a safe place in which to ask questions and discuss ideas

Before students can ask questions or discuss controversial issues, they need to feel that the classroom is a safe place in which to ask questions or disagree with classmates without being put down for it. Ground rules for discussion should be established early in the year and reinforced regularly - not just for discussions about controversial issues, but for all discussions.

Appeal to students’ better nature

In introducing an issue that has the potential to become controversial, teachers can remind students of the importance of respect and tolerance. They might also make a humanitarian appeal to students to remember that prejudiced remarks made in class may offend or embarrass their classmates.
Most students do not want intentionally to hurt others, and, with this reminder, they may strive to couch their comments in less inflammatory language.

**Find out what students know and think about an issue before beginning an inquiry**
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 have. Their responses can come from direct questioning, brainstorming, group discussions, and journal-writing.

**Expose students to multiple perspectives**
Avoid classroom discussions on issues until students have had an opportunity to research and explore the issue from a variety of perspectives. But remember, exposure to different points of view on a controversial issue is necessary but insufficient. Students may listen, view, or read only to support what they already think or to find flaws, omissions, misinformation.

A key habit of mind the teacher seeks to develop through these processes is ‘critical openness’—both a disposition to be open-minded to others’ views and the ability to subject them to critical study, both the willingness to suspend judgment and the ability ultimately to reach reasoned conclusions that are open to change.

**Promote dialogue and active listening**
Students usually need help in understanding the differences between dialogue and debate. Dialogue aims for understanding, enlargement of view, complicating one’s thinking, an openness to change. Dialogue requires real listening. It also requires humility.

How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I am closed to, and even offended by, the contribution of others?

*(Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed.)*

An excellent way to promote listening is by asking students to re-state the perspective of others. Have them paraphrase what they hear another student saying to gain this skill.

**Use active learning methodologies**
Students learn best when actively engaged in the learning. In teaching controversial issues it is important to provide opportunities for various kinds of group discussions: pairs, conversation circles, panels, fishbowls. In addition active learning methodologies can be useful in building empathy (e.g. role-play) and in challenging strongly held prejudices (e.g. a simulation game).

**Promote critical thinking**
Promote skills of critical evaluation and encourage students to interrogate information, its origins and possible biases. Ask critical question to help students to understand the origins of their ideas and attitudes.

**Some examples of critical questioning**
- What is your current understanding of (state issue)?
- Why do you think/feel that way?
- Where have your perceptions and understanding come from?
- How reliable is this information?
- Where have your images come from?
- What might be the role of the media in influencing how you see this situation?
- What about other influences – friends, family, religion?
- Can you imagine an alternative way of seeing this issue? What might it be like?
When dealing with controversial issues, teachers should adopt strategies that teach students how to recognise bias, how to evaluate evidence put before them and how to look for alternative interpretations, viewpoints and sources of evidence, above all to give good reasons for everything they say and do, and to expect good reasons to be given by others. (Bailey, 1998)

The teacher's role in dealing with controversial issues

1. Examine yourself

   What do you, the teacher, think and feel about an issue? Why? Would you tell students at the outset what your views are so that they can allow for possible biases? Or should you not tell them, but guard against any inclinations to manipulate and propagandise?

2. Be responsive to students' feelings and values

   Through such techniques as those outlined above, students' feelings and values are likely to be revealed, for examining a controversial issue is not a bloodless exercise. Just as the teacher's role is not to tell students what to think but to help them learn how to think, so that role is not to tell students what feelings and values to have but to promote an atmosphere in which they can express them without fear, make them explicit to themselves, and consider their validity.

3. Model respect and fairness

   Show respect for all students and their right to express their views. Show balance in representing opposing positions accurately and fairly.

   The teacher cannot pretend to be neutral and has a right to express an opinion too. But it is important to state one’s own opinion in a way that respects others and does not serve to close down the discussion.
4. Correct misinformation

One important role for the teacher during a discussion on a controversial issue is to gently correct misinformation. Keep this information simple and to the point. Avoid entering into confrontation or adopting an argumentative stance with a student or group of students.

5. Emphasise that conflicts are opportunities

Most controversial issues can generate conflict, and a discussion about controversial issues is a good time to remind children that conflicts are opportunities for learning and growth.

6. Show your humanity

Admit doubts, difficulties, and weaknesses in your own position. Allow the students to question your position too.

7. Establish a means of closure

Ensure that the discussion is brought to closure with due sensitivity to the feelings that may have been aroused.

**EMPATHETIC LISTENING**

Listening lies at the heart of education for respect and mutual understanding. Without listening it is not possible to enter another person’s world and hear their story. Empathetic listening means listening with the intent to understand. This is a skill that can be fostered amongst students (see exemplars on the web at www.ncca.ie) and also one that can be modelled by the teacher.

**CHECK LIST TO SEE IF I AM A GOOD LISTENING ROLE MODEL**

- Do I really care about each student in my class?
- Can I find something good to say about each student?
- Do I speak respectfully to each individual?
- Do I let students finish what they are trying to say, and if they hesitate, do I encourage them to go on?
- Do I withhold judgement until the person has finished speaking?
- Am I able to avoid confrontation?
- Do I express understanding and empathy, as appropriate?
- Do I regularly give positive feedback to each pupil?
- Do I assume certain pupils are guilty before listening to the facts?
- Am I able to apologise when I treat a student unfairly?
- Is my body language consistent with my words?
- For example, do I ask them how they are getting on and look poised to rush off?

CLASSROOM EXERCISE: LISTENING FOR FACTS, LISTENING FOR FEELINGS.

The aim of this exercise is to give practice to the art of listening and create awareness that listening is not only about listening to facts but also to the feelings of a person.

Steps

1. Divide into groups of 3. Each group letters themselves A, B, C.

2. A is asked to speak for 2-3 minutes on a topic that they have strong feelings about, e.g. something they feel angry about or excited about. While A is speaking, B listens to the facts of what A is saying and C listens to the feelings A is expressing.

3. B gives feedback to A on the facts heard: C gives feedback on the feelings heard. A responds saying whether or not the feedback is accurate.

4. The exercise is then repeated with each person in the group assuming a different role.

5. When each person has had a turn being A, B, and C then the whole group comes together to share their thoughts on the exercise. The teacher might ask - Which did you find easier to listen to, facts or feelings? What did you notice about the body language of each speaker? Did it match the feelings being expressed? Are there times when we speak and try to conceal our true feelings? Why is it important to listen to both the facts being spoken and the feelings behind them?

Adapted from *Partners Companion to Training for Transformation*, compiled and written by Maureen Sheehy, Published by Partners, Training for Transformation, Dublin, 2000.