

# Small Group Discussions

We use the word discussion in many ways. If the teachers are at the focal point of the classroom, asking questions and rewarding some comments with praise and helping others to come back on track, then it is **not** practising democratic discussion for citizenship. Real discussion will contain difficult moral issues, must address a lot of questions, and is unlikely to have right or wrong answers. It is not an argument that someone wins (Argument and Discussion 1998)<sup>1</sup>, but an active discussion between pupils during which new skills are learnt, and moral positions worked out.

I advise letting the pupils arrange themselves in friendship groups of three or four. (They have to talk very honestly together, so they should be friends. If there is trouble the 'peace-breakers' will have to work on their own.) If this is the first attempt at small group democratic discussion we have to explain what the aims are, something like the following. Perhaps you will want to put them up on the board, or equivalent? Each of us has to begin by exploring what we think and feel.

- We can start by **asking the others** what they think, (and listening).
- We can explain how we feel about **one or other bit of the problem**.
- We can agree with **more than one point of view** (important in a democracy).
- We must **let everyone talk** – encouraging the shy or silent ones.
- Discuss the possible **outcomes of some possible actions** (good or bad).
- Give short examples of results **from our own experience**.
- End up with **some agreed suggestions** for making matters better.

Some teachers like to appoint a 'chairman' and a 'secretary' for each group, but I have always found that was a waste of time and sometimes a source of controversy. Usually some pupils starts them off by saying, "*Right...what do you think about...*"

Sometimes the pupils need you to help to sort out the science involved. That may be very good. It can show that science can produce some explanations, but it cannot solve the human aspects of the problem. Often the pupils say, "We need more research about...", and that is valuable too.

I found that the students loved having a tape-recorder, turning it off and then on again when they were ready with a new idea. At the end of the lesson they may give you the tape saying, "That **was** difficult, we couldn't really suss it out", or "That was a good one", which can develop into a kind of formative assessment. (*Listening to tapes is VERY time consuming. Be careful not to promise more than you can perform.*)

Each discussion might last 15-20 minutes. Always give the class warning as you get near the end of the lesson in case they are in the middle of a detailed point when the bell goes. They may need time to 'cool off' before they go out of the classroom. One good way of finishing the lesson is to ask each group to write down or read out their suggestions (together with possible problems) so that they can be shared with the rest of the class. They often need reminding that some new regulations, or rescinding some old ones, might be essential to ensure that the worst does not happen.

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon. (1998) Discussion and Argument. *School Science Review*, 291.  
ASE CD ROM Resources – *Can we; should we?*

## **Examples of Democratic Discussion**

In an ideal world (where is that?), we would have a short video to start off each discussion. You may find that you can collect some from TV or at least pictures from the Internet. Failing that just start them off with a bit of a story, and make sure you make it as visual as possible. Each of the following could be made to connect with part of your science scheme of work.

Here, in no particular order, are six examples to start you off. You can probably think of many more.

### **The old woman and her cats**

Women live longer than men, but this problem about pets can apply to both. If they have no children they live, sometimes for many years, in almost total solitude. Like all of us they need someone to love, like a dog or a cat. Some become adopted by stray cats. This can be very good for the old people and the animals, but there are problems with buying pet food, and much worse problems in keeping the home clean. It might smell terrible, with upset litter trays everywhere, and may be a source of E-coli infection, which is deadly to the old. The neighbours may call in the RSPCA, or Public Health inspectors. Often they take away the old people's pets, which is heart breaking for them, although not for the neighbours.

### **Kidney donation**

We have two kidneys each, and yet one healthy working kidney is all the body needs. On the other hand there are hundreds if not thousands of people who desperately need a kidney transplant because neither of their own kidneys are working properly. That means that their blood is not properly filtered. They feel awful, and need to be attached to an artificial kidney machine three nights a week for at least six hours, just to remain alive. There are not enough such machines to go round for everyone. Who will give them a healthy kidney? At the moment the doctors have to rely on the relations of dying casualty victims to give permission for the kidney to be removed while still on life support. That is distressing. Should we all carry kidney-donor cards?

### **The nature reserve**

Not much of our country is a natural 'wilderness', so we cannot explore how animals and plants live together without people. We are part of the planet's wildlife. Most of us live in towns that are not at all like wildernesses, but they are our environment. We have made them comfortable for ourselves. Should we make a small nature reserve at school? Can we or should we be a part of it and observe it? Even the National Parks are not real wildernesses. If we fall down a mountain when we are there on holiday we are rescued. Jeeps drive across the moors to find us, altering the environment as they go. Can we be a part of the natural environment or not? Perhaps we always are? How should we protect it from us? What regulations do we need?

## Travelling by car and air pollution

Cars are so convenient. Even before we can walk, let alone drive, we travel in them to school, to the shops, and to the doctor. An increasing number of children get asthma every year, which is made worse by the air pollution caused by cars. Most childhood asthma is not life threatening, but if it gets really bad and the patient does not use an inhaler young patients do occasionally die from it. If someone does die, whose fault is it? There are a number of ways of reducing the exhaust fumes from petrol-driven cars, and there is also the possibility of hydrogen-driven cars. (Why is burning hydrogen as a fuel better than burning petrol vapour?) All ways of reducing dangerous pollutants from cars would increase the cost of travel. Then everything would get more expensive. What should we do?

## Shopping and fashion - who wins?

Most of us enjoy shopping, especially for clothes. Just walking around a shopping arcade with friends is fun and the advertisements for reduced prices are very eye-catching. However, there is also the reverse side of this. Some people have less money than others. They want to have brand-named fashion jeans and trainers, but may only be able to afford ones without the all-important tag. All jeans are much the same. In Third World countries they are mass-produced by workers, sometime children, who earn very little for long hours of working the machines. Only the owner-manufacturers make a lot of money. In our own country, youngsters who cannot afford the latest fashion are made miserable, especially when their friends comment about their clothes. Some may be tempted to shoplift. A few of us with money benefit from the shopping fashions, many suffer in our country and, many many more, suffer from working conditions in the producing countries. What can we do?

## Sports and danger

There are risks, big and small, in everything we do. The probability of being hurt, or of being killed is usually expressed as a ratio, perhaps '1 in a hundred' which does not mean that you will be quite safe 99 times, and then at risk the next time, but **always at risk** in that proportion. Government regulations try to make life safer for us, but what happens if we **want** to take risks? Playing Rugby football is certainly dangerous. One or two youngsters are killed most years and many sustain injuries that will cripple them sooner or later. We all know how frequently professional footballers are injured. Boxing is worse. Should we pass laws that will ban boxing and Rugby football? Citizens are free to make choices in a democracy. Does the risk affect other people? Two years ago a woman with very young children took a huge risk - 50% or 1 in 2. She was a skilled mountaineer with a chance to go up the 'killer mountain' K2 in the Himalayans, and she never came back. Who suffered most? What about children? Should there be legislation against some people taking some risks? Would you feel the same if it had been the children's father rather than their mother?