

**Practitioner perceptions of their role in facilitating the handling of controversial issues in  
contested societies: a Northern Irish experience**

Alan McCully

School of Education,  
University of Ulster at Coleraine  
Coleraine BT52 1SA  
Co. Londonderry

Email: [AW.McCully@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:AW.McCully@ulster.ac.uk)

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In Britain, at least, the literature relating to the teaching of controversial issues tends to be associated with the major humanities curriculum projects of the 1970s and 80s (Stenhouse 1969, McKernan 1976, Stradling et al 1984, Rudduck 1986) It is only with the advent of citizenship education in the late 1990s that teaching controversial issues is again becoming a focus of general educational interest. The clear message from the earlier literature is that, whatever the institutional support available, successful teaching in this area places special demands on the role of the teacher. Research also suggests that preparing teachers for this work also presents special challenges (Parker et al. 2001, Smith et al. 1996), not least in contexts where there are deep societal divisions.

This paper explores how committed practitioners in Northern Ireland (NI) have responded to the challenges posed by handling controversial, or sensitive, issues with young people in a contested society. First, it suggests that the principles of practice that have emerged over the thirty odd years of violence, have tended to emphasise cognitive understanding as a tool for clarifying values without also accommodating the affective domain; and that unless this emotional factor is taken into account the work will have a restricted impact. Then, using the experience of a recent development project, *Speak Your Piece* into the handling of controversial issues, it distils the experience of twenty experienced practitioners to establish a profile of effective practice. Thus, the study might inform future teacher education, particularly as it relates to the emerging Local and Global Citizenship programme envisaged by the recent Curriculum Review in NI.

### **Handling controversial Issues in a Contested Society**

Stradling (Stradling et al. 1984, p.2) defined Controversial Issues as 'those problems and disputes that divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values'. This definition is useful for those educators who seek

to raise potentially sensitive cultural and political issues with young people in the contested context of NI. They do so in a society that has seen major communal conflict resulting in over three thousand five hundred violent deaths in a period of thirty-five years. Even during the recent periods of ceasefire and the emergence of a visible, if fragile, peace process, it has proved very difficult to achieve any political consensus or effect any serious reconciliation between the two communities. Value positions are deeply held and perspectives are often such that they are mutually exclusive. Many people, usually with reason, perceive themselves, directly or indirectly, as victims of the Troubles and do not contemplate compromise with those they associate with causing harm to them or their community. If Stradling's definition lacks one dimension it is that it fails to embrace that strong emotional element that often accompanies controversial issues in societies characterised by religious, cultural or ethnic conflict. It is the premise here that facilitating such emotions is a critical factor in determining whether or not a practitioner in an educational setting can engage participants in effective learning. Hence, hereafter, when the term 'controversial' is used it refers to this 'sensitive' dimension thus distinguishing the issues under scrutiny from those 'controversial public issues' such as nuclear disarmament, juvenile crime or state-assisted suicide which generate strong views but do not normally go to the heart of students' sense of ethnic or cultural identity (Hess 2002).

Professionally, as teacher, teacher educator and researcher the writer has had direct experience of three significant initiatives addressing the handling of controversial issues in N.I.; the Schools Council History Project (SCHP) (Shemilt 1980; Gallagher 2002), the Schools Cultural Studies Project (SCSP) (Skilbeck 1973; Robinson 1983) and Speak Your Piece (SYP) (McCully et al. 1999). In the 1970s and 1980s SCHP and SCSP established that the creation of a supportive and sensitive classroom ethos is a crucial pre-requisite to constructive dialogue. Furthermore, through an enquiry, evidence-based approach key concepts and skills can be fostered and then applied to a range of situations, however contentious. Thus a 'gradient of controversy' is established that

might involve addressing conflict situations removed in time and space, before learning is directed closer to home.

Thus, a model emerged which places emphasis on the importance of encouraging rational thinking. This sits well with those who have written on the handling of controversial issues on both sides of the Atlantic (Stradling et al 1984, Wellington 1986, Lockwood 1996). The importance of nurturing critical objective reasoning in young people to help them work through difficult and emotive material is indisputable but recent thinking into the part played by emotions in the learning process indicates that there is a danger of placing an undue emphasis on the capacity of individuals to think rationally and constructively in emotionally charged situations.

Educators addressing conflict situations such as that in N.I. must expect to meet heightened emotion. Many individuals have directly experienced the impact of death or injury within their family or immediate community. Many people's lives have been significantly affected by the uncertainties, disruption and distrust generated by communal violence, guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency measures of the security forces. In discussing societies transforming toward peaceful accommodation Lederach (1995, pp 19-20) has alluded to the importance of personal transformation; individuals coming to terms with feelings of fear, anger, and bitterness emanating from living through a period of communal violence.

Unless the emotional dimension is taken account of, and given expression, then there is a danger that it will dominate any attempt at engagement, and block out more rational thinking processes. Arising from his experience of teaching anti-racist education in Australia, Johnson (1998, p.141) warns us that we ignore emotion at our peril: 'because our teaching does not address the feelings and emotions already associated with students' existing 'knowledge' of the world, those feelings and emotions cause the students to ignore our teaching.' If emotion dominates participants are

likely to retreat into defensive, 'tribal' positions. By contrast, if discussion is thoroughly rational there is a danger that 'politeness' prevents real opinions being expressed and more contentious engagement is avoided (Arlow 2004, p.264).

In 1992 the various, voluntary attempts to address the Northern Ireland conflict through the school curriculum were rationalised and made statutory by introducing the cross-curricular theme of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) (DENI 1992; Richardson 1992; Smith and Robinson 1993). Research by Smith and Robinson (1996, p.21) on the implementation of EMU in its initial statutory years indicated that lack of pedagogical expertise was often cited as to why teachers stopped short of engaging with more contentious issues. However, they also detected some personal discomfort:

. There is a considerable anxiety amongst teachers about their ability to deal with this emotional component to learning. In part this is expressed through comments that initial training concentrated on the cognitive rather than the emotive aspects of learning. In part through expressions that movement into more controversial issues leaves teachers vulnerable to parental disapproval, or that such discussions may get out of hand and lead to a loss of control and authority.

Therefore, any exclusive emphasis on rational thinking as a vehicle for encouraging values clarification may lead to avoidance on the part of pupils and teachers. In advocating a stronger citizenship dimension to EMU underpinned by the concepts of human rights, civic responsibility, justice and democracy the authors concluded:

The challenge now is whether such initiatives can help young people move beyond the polite exchange so that they engage with each other in meaningful discussion of controversial social, cultural, religious and political issues. (p. 82)

Smith then theorised that, often, it is not the issue itself that creates conflict, but the dynamics around it, as shaped by the experience, attitudes, and skills of participants. Therefore, being aware

of those factors that can facilitate, or impede, creative discourse, and having the knowledge and skills to deal with them, should help practitioners create an atmosphere in which emotional ‘baggage’ can be worked through and rational outcomes fostered (see figure 1).

This model provided a framework for Speak Your Piece to develop existing practice, taking into account those factors which act to impede inclusive dialogue.

### **Speak Your Piece**

Speak Your Piece, a university-based research and development project supported by the Channel 4 educational television series, *Off the Walls*, sought to encourage innovative practice. It focused on five themes deemed central to the N.I. conflict: Identity, Culture, Religion, Politics and Future Choices. The development strand was carried by two pilot groups of twenty teachers and twenty youth workers, respectively. The non-formal youth work sector offered a strong tradition of innovative practice in the field of community relations (JEDI 2002).

At the outset three key principles were agreed. The project should be about:

- enabling dialogue which is forthright and inclusive
- providing alternatives to violence and avoidance as ways of responding to conflict
- facilitating participatory decision making that encourages democratic processes.

Discussion was a key ingredient for as Parker and Hess remind us ‘it is relevant to the broad social aims of democracy’ (Parker and Hess 2001 p.273). Inclusive dialogue is, in itself, a controversial issue in N.I. where, at all levels of society, groups deem it appropriate not to engage with others whom they perceive as antagonistic towards them. The challenge is to provide young

people with contexts for dialogue and democratic action in a society where local politics has been strangled by sectarian disputes. Research has documented the ‘democratic deficit’ felt by Northern Irish young people and the impact it has on their thinking, including the relationship between fear and the avoidance of sensitive issues (Comiskey 1997 p.1 ).

Speak Your Piece set out to challenge this.

The project’s experience offers a number of potential areas for research; for example, why its implementation proved more successful in some school settings rather than others or how teachers and youth workers incorporated it into their respective curricula. Here, priority is given to the experience of practitioners and how it has impacted on their pedagogy. Frequently, lack of training and confidence are cited by teachers as barriers to working with controversial issues (Rudduck 1986, Smith and Robinson 1996). Before we can properly devise appropriate pre-service and in-service provision it is vital that we gain a deeper understanding of what shapes the practice of those working actively (and effectively) in the field.

## **Methodology**

It was important to ascertain what practitioners considered to be the key characteristics of their practice and then to distil responses to arrive at a set of core principles for handling controversial issues in a contested society. At the end of the project’s formal three year duration a residential conference brought together participating teachers and youth workers for reflection. At successive sessions issues raised by participants were explored and refined. At the end of two days six themes emerged as central to community relations practice:

- Materials and resources
- Training

- Support from managers and organisations
- The ‘process’ of community relations work
- The promotion of democratic values
- Characteristics of effective practice.

A tentative description of desirable factors emerged for each theme along with sets of critical questions. It was agreed that the latter should become the basis of follow-up interviews to enable the collective outcome to be tested against the reflections of individual practitioners.

Nine teachers and eleven youth workers were interviewed at length and the interviews transcribed. The approach was semi-structured and flexible. From the data, it is clear that the different professional contexts of teachers and youth workers have a significant bearing on how they relate to young people and that a comparison is worthy of future analysis. Yet, for the purpose of this paper their rationales, approaches and craft skills have enough in common to allow the collective term “practitioner” to be used. In support of this, attention is drawn to Jeffs and Smiths’ concept of the ‘informal educator’ and their assertion that educators in formal and informal settings ‘have more in common than both often admit’ (Jeffs and Smith 1999, p.16).

Issues relating to resources, training and institutional support are not covered here, other than to state that all were deemed important in providing a supportive working environment. Instead, the focus is on “process”; how practitioners engage young people to take them beyond ‘the polite exchange’ and promote democratic values. While the emphasis here is very much on practitioner perceptions it is important to state that a series of classroom / youth group observations, audio and video-tapes of practice, and two hundred and fifty evaluations of young people are also available as the basis for triangulation.

## **Findings**

### **Community Relations work as a process**

It emerged clearly from interviews that practitioners did not see it as their business to dictate outcomes to young people. They viewed their work around controversial issues as a process in which they facilitated a clarification of participants' thinking. One of the teachers articulated a position that was reinforced throughout by others:

*The emphasis was very much placed on asking young people to critically think for themselves and not on shaping their views. It was a process - how they arrived at those opinions was the crucial factor and it was that I'm trying to influence. (Teacher)*

Placing the emphasis on helping young people to clarify their thinking rather than telling them what to think has been central to practice the last thirty years as a means of protecting against the charge of indoctrination. Stradling (1984 p.4-5) refers to 'cultivating tentativeness' and Rudduck (1986) to procedures to help the student better understand 'the nature and implications of his or her own point of view'

SYP practitioners were highly aware of their potential power to influence and took conscious steps to build safeguards into their practice:

*Sometimes they would ask, what do you really think? and I would say 'I'm not going to answer that today. I'll tell you at the end of this whole process if you really want to know. . this is about what you think. (Teacher)*

Communication skills were an important element. One interviewee talked of "*teaching the art of discussion and debate*", what Parker et al (2001, p.273) refer to as 'teaching with and for discussion', but, crucially, there was recognition that such sessions also had to tap in to people's deeply felt positions if they were to have an impact. Jeffs and Smith (1996, pp.51-52) term this 'attending to feelings'. For instance, several made reference to the critical importance of holding

one's nerve when students react emotionally. With transparency a breakthrough can be reached by which participants become much more comfortable at dealing with difference:

*Sometimes we had to have those bun-fight arguments in the classroom. You get those out of the way and by the end of the module we are maturing towards more rational and logic debate. They do come to an idea that this is how things can be dealt with. (teacher)*

Rudduck (1986, p.13), understandably, cautions against discussions too easily degenerating into turmoil at the initial stage yet strong reactions are a feature of cultural and political life in N.I. and therefore outlets for emotional expression may be necessary to ground practice in authenticity.

Thus, practice can evolve toward a more constructive balance between the rational and emotional:

*That process can be carried through in a meaningful kind of way, you can get to the point where the hard issues can be faced without jarring the relationship, without it becoming counterproductive, but instructive.....They get the feeling that nothing is being imposed but here's a framework with which everyone can feel comfortable and work. (Youth worker)*

Practitioners were very conscious both of the power of emotions to transform thinking but also to destroy trust. One talked of the work being “*about young people expressing themselves in an environment where they haven't had a chance to verbalise things before..... I facilitate a process .... I do try to control the boundaries of the emotional*”. Student evaluations, in general, supported these judgments. The expression of strong opinions and feelings did alert many students to the avoidance referred to by Arlow. For example:

*Perhaps if I had watched these videos last year they would not have had as big an impact on me, I was always able to block out what was going on around me. I don't think I cared, but this summer when I saw what was happening in Drumcree (a highly contentious Orange parade) emotions of anger came to the surface - emotions and opinions I didn't know I had. (Student)*

In summary, then, practitioners had a vision of taking young people through a process to help them to express their thinking and feelings on contentious issues and, in doing so, to put these up for scrutiny by others. The exact nature of this process was less clear and often defined by their own personal and professional experience.

### **The Promotion of Democratic Values**

Theoretical work on EMU, and latterly on democratic citizenship, has focused extensively on the importance of creating a ‘whole school ethos’ which embraces the values of respect and tolerance in every day relationships as well as towards other cultures and traditions (Smith and Robinson 1996 pp. 27-30, CCEA 1997). The concepts of ‘the democratic school’ and the ‘democratic classroom’ are promoted as the context in which young people might develop the aptitude for active, democratic participation. The emphasis is often placed on the pre-conditions necessary – for example, structural arrangements such as consultative disciplinary procedures and school councils where young peoples’ voices might genuinely contribute to the running of the institution (see Rowe 1996, Cunningham 2000). No practitioner is an island and in N.I. schools tend to reflect the dominant values of the communities in which they are set (Murray, 1985). Handling controversial issues is threatening to individuals because it challenges values and beliefs and also to institutions because it encourages young people to challenge the status quo.

SYP was interested in how the prevailing culture of organisations impinges on those seeking to raise controversial issues with young people. Previous research indicates that teachers and youth workers often cite lack of institutional support as a reason for avoiding more contentious issues (Smith and Robinson 1992, p.32; JEDI 2001, p.60). The SYP pilot groups were highly committed to the community relations agenda and many also had considerable experience in the field. Whole institutional commitment was valued but not regarded as crucial. The chief concern of

practitioners was that they were given the freedom to act on their professional judgment and, provided they remained consistent to negotiated guidelines, then, whatever the reservations, they should receive the support of managers if the work should be questioned by colleagues or in the community. 'Risk-taking' was a phrase frequently used. While 'isolation' was identified as an occupational hazard some even acknowledged that there were professional and personal gains from working, to an extent, at variance with the prevailing values of their organisation:

*I sensed the resistance of the English and RE departments to this type of work. I was operating on my own and while this was restricting it also had advantages in my relations with young people .... they saw me as a risk taker. (teacher)*

Raising controversial issues has a subversive hue and, in the words of one school inspector, EMU cannot be 'sanitised, canned, neatly labelled and on the shelf' (quoted in Smith 1994, p.22).

Those who advocate the handling of controversial issues through discussion do so because they see its potential to promote democratic engagement. What aspects of practice did practitioners identify as conducive to the promotion of democratic values? Reference has already been made to the stress placed on openness and transparency. A tangible way to achieve this was reaching consensus on a code of conduct for sessions addressing such issues as respecting all opinions, the right to challenge all opinions, 'no put downs' and the importance of confidentiality once sessions were over. Much of this is long established practice in youth work and is explicitly negotiated; more often with teachers it is implicit in relationships and practice established over time.

Interestingly, the Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP) practice of 'setting an agenda' (Rudduck 1986, p.16) was, perhaps, a forerunner to the class agreements emerging from the new citizenship programme in N.I.

Experiential learning strategies were cited as very important in helping teachers open up their classrooms. Again aspects of youth work were influential. Sometimes, simply by employing active approaches teachers found that the dynamics of the classroom changed. By their nature, activities like this offer a model of cooperation with the potential to be transferred to other contexts, educational and social. Jeffs and Smith (1999, p.25), for instance, advocate that informal educators systematically model both listening and dialogue.

*I think the actual pedagogy was such that it encouraged that sort of sharing and if pupils see that other pupils are involved in openness they are more willing to take them at face value and be equally open and realise that there is an amount of protection of those views within the class. (teacher)*

This comment mirrors the 'building of shared understanding' between teacher and pupils that HCP achieved through using video to demonstrate practice (Rudduck 1986, p.16).

There was divergence on the extent that young people should influence the direction of sessions. Many youth workers aspire to this objective as a central principle of their work.

*We may have ideas and there needs to be feeding in of some ideas, but again it's the skill of getting a group to reflect and work through some of these things themselves so that they begin to own it and then catch a sense of vision themselves as to where action and relationships need to go. I think that's democracy. (youth worker).*

For teachers' professional roles and authority this presented particular challenges:

*... the power structure in the classroom has changed completely... That while you are leading the whole process at least some of the responsibilities have to be with the kids and if they feel, as has happened to me several times, that they just don't want to get into this area than that's fine, you can't push that as you might have to in a normal class ... for me it did become a much more democratic process..... At the end of the day you still have all of the same structure that you had before but I think the point is to give them as much control as they're prepared to take.*

However, youth workers, too, tempered their idealism with reality. Everyone, adult or young person, in divided and entrenched societies contributes in some way to that division yet it must be accepted that even extreme positions are held with sincerity and, frequently, integrity. Discomfort is a necessary pre-requisite of critical reflection but to push too far into the discomfort zone is to invite rejection. On the other hand, to allow young people to set the agenda can lead to the avoidance you are trying to challenge. In summary, then, practitioners regarded creating genuine inconclusiveness and ownership of the process as two tangible ways of promoting democratic values in young people. Student evaluations indicated some success in terms of participation:

*I found this lesson helpful as it really made me think about what I would call myself and also how strongly I would defend my identity. It challenged me by showing me that probably in certain circumstances I would not freely express my identity if it would make things easier for me. I found that wrong. (Student)*

### **Characteristics of the Effective Practice**

Others working in the field have identified that open relationships are critical to facilitate the handling of controversial issues. Jeffs and Smith (1999, p.24) refer to ‘the truthfulness of the educator’ and Rudduck (1986, p.17) to teacher ‘integrity’. In N.I. trust building was seen to be at the core of effective practice if discourse was to move into the uncomfortable territory of exploring deeply held, sometimes sacrosanct, positions. One youth worker talked of being ‘*down on the street, and on the corners, building relationship.*’

*It’s got to do with the level of confidence of the worker.... If young people see that the worker is very confident in what they’re doing and not a bit concerned about saying what their view and attitudes are about things, I think that does create a certain safety. (Youth worker)*

Teachers, too, were very aware that they had to break through the formal barriers of the school setting.

In other words, young people take risks on the basis of the confidence they have in their teacher or youth worker. Where trust has not developed, or when adults display a lack of confidence in the process, this will be transmitted to young people. Nor should this confidence be interpreted as arrogance or complacency. Interviewees' comments were laced with humility and frequently recognized the gravity of the responsibility of the trust being placed in them. Confidence came from craft knowledge acquired through experience, and consequently, was not easily articulated. It was clear that the confident, reassuring practitioner seen by the young people, thought deeply about the uncertainties and unpredictability of the work prior to sessions.

*I suppose for me it comes down to the skills experience of the facilitator. ...if you did come in heavy-handed and make people too uncomfortable, it takes just as long to build trust up again or to build any level of trust from scratch as it does to actually work from the other way. (Youth worker)*

As Jeffs and Smith (1999, p.51) recognize this is more than just intuition. It is 'through habit, or what Freud called a pre-conscious thought that we recognize in this situation some pattern that we have seen in the past.' Thus, sense can then be made of practice.

When probed practitioners attempted to identify the factors that build trust. Sharing a sense of risk with young people and showing respect for the right of all viewpoints to be aired and challenged have already been mentioned. Aspects of effective teaching in any context, such as pre-planning, preparation and stimulating resources, were also important. Another key strategy was sharing personal biography by demonstrating the practitioner's willingness to divulge less public aspects of their lives,

*Certainly, I think the worker has to be honest and open about their own agenda and about their own experiences that they are sharing. ...As long as you're not dominating, using it for your own ends. I think it's important that you're able to talk about your own experiences and stuff. (Youth worker)*

The emphasis placed on genuine engagement with young people, as far as possible on their own terms, was reinforced again and again. This is the 'commitment' demanded by Jeffs and Smith (1999, p.14-16) As one interviewee explained, it is vital '*that you are genuinely interested in what they have to say and that you are sincere in giving them that space .... They pick up right away whether or not you want to hear where they're coming from and what they are about.*' (Youth worker)

Biography was also deemed important in engaging emotional empathy:

*Whenever I'm talking to young people, I can bring my own experience of living through 1968 right through the civil rights movement up to the present time. ... It's hard to ignore if someone is sitting across from you telling their story. .... If someone in a group has had a loved one maimed, injured or killed in the conflict, that can have a profound impact on somebody who has never actually experienced that. (Teacher)*

Again, teachers, particularly, were very aware of the impact self-disclosure has on the learning environment. One talked of almost suspending "*the notion of being a teacher*" and entering a mutual learning process with his students – "*so if you are beginning a journey, as I try to depict this, you have got to be yourself, as practitioner, part of discovery and part of the journey rather than saying, I know the end point I want to bring you to.*" Several interviewees also noted that being confident does not mean being certain. Modelling that you are prepared to look at alternative viewpoints, to admit to not having the answers and to express doubt, confusion and uncertainty again were regarded as contributing factors to building trust.

This use of self-disclosure challenges Stenhouse's concept of the 'neutral chairman' in the handling of controversial issues (HCP, 1970; Bridges, 1986). Recent writing has re-opened the debate. Harwood (1998), while arguing for flexibility, ideally favours teachers taking the neutral stance, at least in the primary school setting. Others, notably Lockwood (1996) and the Crick Report (1999 pp. 59-60), have argued for a more interventionist approach depending on purpose and circumstances. SYP practitioners had very definite views on this. Of the twenty interviewed only one adhered to the neutrality stance and she was from a non-Northern Ireland background. Otherwise, the consensus was that, as products of a divided society, neutrality was impossible. In any case if you do not declare yourself others will make assumptions about you that will prejudice your work. One interviewee encapsulated the collective position, "*I don't think there is anybody neutral ... I think you have to strive to be impartial*". Thus, your professional integrity is placed on display:

*It's about me being honest, I'm prejudiced, I have prejudices in this area and I'm working on them just as you work on yours. You have abandoned the concept of neutral facilitation. It's saying that we're in this process too, but not depicting yourself as an idiot. We've done our training and engaged in many discussions in our team here and in other networks. We're having these conversations all the time. (Youth worker).*

There were differing views as to when, in the interests of impartiality, self-disclosure should be used. Some agreed with the interviewee who argued for "*giving your views without shilly-shallying*" while others held back "*for pupils to ask me, to demand that my neutrality ends.*" Yet, all agreed that young people expected practitioners to make their views known. Practitioners, too, are subject to 'gut reactions' generated by their own backgrounds. However, having worked through this process with peers first, they feel better able to empathise with the reactions of young people.

Trust building requires being aware of needs and sensitivities. Practitioners rejected a rigid model of community relations work for, as Stradling et al. (1984, p.103) point out, variations in practice are not necessarily a weakness but reflect the vital ingredient of personal engagement so crucial to the work. The idea of a gradual lead-in to controversy (and to meetings with young people from other backgrounds) was a sound general principle but the real strength of effective practice was to make judgments on young people's needs and to pace developmental work so that the challenge was incremental, thus strengthening the bond between practitioner and group. Therefore, it might be deemed beneficial for some young people to engage quickly in cross-community contact work on contentious issues whereas, with others, the social and political circumstances might determine a more gradual path:

*. All of north Belfast is probably an interface and many of the communities we work with have a very violent history in relation to the communities who are just across the street ...maybe it's not so simple for them to come together in that way ...we work with that siege mentality, we work on the development of what strengths they do possess.... (Youth worker)*

Once again, judgment was grounded in craft knowledge and professional experience.

Flexibility was another key element. The emotional dimension can materialise quickly and unexpectedly, triggered by an unguarded remark or a particular use of language. The capacity to accommodate the passions aroused and legitimize them within the context of the session can dictate whether or not participants are kept on board. Skilful facilitation rests on *"how can you sense when an emotional thing is beginning to get close to blocking and try to shift it into the hard question or issue. I 'm not aware of a magic wand for that one. It's trying to sense where a group is. (Youth worker)*

A final characteristic deemed crucial to preserving the trust of young people is an awareness of their needs at the conclusion of sessions involving strong opinions, rancour, emotional energy or personal disclosure:

*Issues can be left up in the air if the young people don't have some means of going back and saying I'm concerned or I'm struggling with this issue. There's got to be adequate support.*  
(Youth worker)

Respondents emphasized the importance of 'winding down' sessions and, individually if necessary, offering participants reassurance. Yet several expressed concern that time constraints sometimes prevented this being done adequately.

## **Conclusions**

Unquestionably, practitioners have accepted the challenge presented by Alan Smith's model (figure 1). Many of the barriers have been systematically and sensitively tackled enabling young people from a wide range of backgrounds to gain greater insight and understanding of alternative viewpoints, and to clarify their thinking, accordingly.

From the interview data an impressive picture emerges of those prepared to work in the field of controversial issues. Practitioners are confident, self-reliant and committed. They are prepared to take risks yet unquestionably have the interests of the young people they work with at heart. Their practice is built on a foundation of craft knowledge yet extends far beyond that of technical competence. It is characterised by flexible and innovative responses to the varied and multiple needs of those with whom they work. They reflect critically, indeed almost agonize, on their actions and possible consequences. Their value base is liberal and pluralist yet they strive to understand the values of polarized communities. They are committed to inclusive classrooms or

youth groups in the expectation that this is preparation for a more inclusive, peaceful and just society. They are conscious that they should model the values and actions they hope for in young people. Yet they are also pragmatic and resilient to institutional buffeting and are prepared to work with, and challenge, irrational thinking from whatever quarter.

This profile is a daunting one. Frankly, it describes the exceptional teacher, and probably the outstanding youth worker, also. Both professions have huge demands placed upon them. The Northern Ireland education system is academically orientated and many teachers would not share the vision of education espoused by SYP practitioners. Most teach in segregated schools and are comfortable within that environment. In the context of the upsurge in sectarian intolerance in the wake of the peace process work on controversial issues more than ever requires confident skilled, risk-takers. Such practitioners are not easily mass-produced. Best practice is ‘an artful, although rational pursuit, rather than a formulaic exercise of mechanically applying prescribed techniques’ (Lookwood 1996, p.30). Therefore, for the new Local and Global Citizenship programme in N.I. to be successful its architects must understand that detailed training programmes are not enough. Careful teacher recruitment will be the critical first step, followed by opportunities to gain incremental experience in a peer-supportive environment.

A final concern arises from the type of data presented in this paper. It is predominantly from the perspective of practitioners. The learning is based on their interpretation of what succeeds, collaborated by those young people on whom practice has impacted positively. We know much less about those whose emotional barrier has not been penetrated and who are likely to carry entrenched attitudes into adulthood. The work pre-supposes that doubt and confusion arising from the airing of conflicting viewpoints are catalysts for values clarification. For many this is the case but there are indications that participants who have rejected this have been those who have been demonstratively uncomfortable when sacrosanct positions have been contested in public contexts.

SYP encouraged action research. We need more empirical evidence on the experience of young people gleaned from as wide a cross-section as possible. SYP practitioners have made a worthy contribution to peace education in Northern Ireland and to the understanding of handling controversial issues. It has yet to be firmly established whether direct engagement with controversial issues is viewed as positively by all young people as it is by SYP practitioners.

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