

Conference Session 1.1: Academic – Research and Teaching
Encouraging Interfaith Understanding through Personal Encounters

Dr Ed Kessler MBE

Woolf Institute, Cambridge, UK

Education and the personal encounter

Education is not really an institution. It is a fundamental process of growing up and living. It starts with our parents and family, and continues within our communities and institutions. It is greatly influenced by the media, which bombard us with messages both overt and hidden.

One of the most powerful forms of education is example. Children copy, which is fundamental to establishing norms and patterns of behaviour, believing and thinking. It affects what follows in terms of how knowledge and explanation are received. Education is not free of contention for the pursuit of knowledge and understanding bring dilemmas that need resolving, and actions that need evaluating, and choices to be made. Education is therefore not value free or neutral, for it is about transmitting and receiving the values that are the beliefs of those whose examples we are presented with and which affect how we make our choices.

Schools, colleges and universities become places of certain values and of value. Just as armies are needed to defend a country so education is needed to defend a civilisation. Articulating values, aims and purposes becomes an exercise in what we believe about ourselves, the world and each other. Education involves questions of values, so education has to take beliefs seriously.

One of the most fundamental questions education has to answer is not simply how to accommodate beliefs, nor how to accommodate different beliefs; rather, how does education accommodate *potentially conflicting beliefs*?

Education is key to building stronger ties between traditions and between the religious and secular world, thereby providing a framework for the constructive engagement of diversity, including disagreement. Understanding interfaith relations can be used as one model for conflict resolution, and to appreciate the value of religious texts and perspectives in a diverse society.

The act of encountering different groups of people and different faiths acknowledges that whilst we are all uniquely different as individuals and communities, we are also connected and have shared values. Thus, education needs to deal with deep-seated issues of belief, values, identity and society; to face conflicting beliefs, explore why they seem to be such, talk about differing experiences, authorities, origins, hopes, destinies, and to identify the issues of values and practices that arise.

Encounter moves beyond simple 'learning about' other traditions, which is not sufficient as a basis for mutual understanding for we can only understand the 'Other' by interpreting what we encounter in the light of our own experience. However, through encounter students discover a shared humanity and learn that commonality emerges through different religious stories and practices, and that disagreement and conflict may be the result of 'distance' rather than 'discernment' at close quarters.

This academic process involves exchange and dialogue. It involves listening as well as speaking, an attempt to understand others in their own terms, as we ourselves wish to be

understood.

The Pedagogy of the Personal Encounter

1) Begin with common ground

Whilst it is essential to explore difference, encouraging interfaith understanding begins with experiences or beliefs that different faiths have in common, particularly shared tradition and values.

2) Explore perceptions

What we *believe* is a crucial element in our sense of identity, our sense of meaning (or otherwise) in life, our attitudes and our actions. We are all born within a culture and we learn it from our earliest days. Our culture helps to shape the way we view the world and others. It fashions our perspectives.

Beliefs are closely linked to other similar identifiers and motivators, like opinions, assumptions, values, cultures, and are often contrasted with harder-edged and on the whole less contentious elements such as fact, reality, and matter. Yet 'believing that' and 'believing in' are powerful influences on what we consider to be right, worthwhile and important.

3) Engage in dialogue

Once we are aware of our own perceptions, we can begin to engage with others more effectively. Personal encounters foster dialogue. Through dialogue, neither participant is required to relinquish or alter their beliefs but both will be affected and changed by the process. As dialogue increases, so does understanding.

4) Respect Difference

The process of encounter helps to unravel the complex of identities – social, religious, ethnic, and others – which we all hold. In this way, students learn to value diversity as expressed through language, food, clothes, dress and rituals for example, whilst, at the same time, opening up the shared ethical space in which respective beliefs and values, often convergent, can be explored and understood through inter-personal engagement. Living with diversity requires tolerance. Are there limits to tolerance and diversity? Of course! There are some non-negotiable values, including freedom of speech. I want to add there can be no resolution of conflict without dialogue, no dialogue without listening, no listening without tolerance, no tolerance without respect; no dialogue, no listening, no tolerance, no respect without education.

Education influences and reflects the values of society and that is why it needs so much attention. We believe in education as a route to well being. We believe that education promotes self-understanding, and understanding of others. But we hope for more than that. We hope that understanding will produce positive action and responsible behaviour. We hope for progress in human knowledge and flourishing! To my students, I say, 'It is not enough to understand the world. The point is - to change it!'

Conclusion

I believe in an education that includes equipping students to live in a society with

religious faiths that differ in many important respects, and yet which share many important features. These have shaped and do shape much of our spirituality, our culture, our society, our morality and our ideals. We weaken all of them if we do not enable children to learn about religions and learn from religion.

There is no alternative than to build on our commonality and face our differences. Separation and distancing are not practical. Worse, they may lead to marginalization, conflict and ultimately persecution. Wanting to be faithful to my tradition does not involve me in diminishing the traditions of others. Practising my belief does not require me to discriminate against those who wish to practise their beliefs.

Holding all these together does create tension. It is not the negation of the value of belief, identity and culture, the things that make us what we are and give such meaning to life. It is the precondition of being able to value them together in a diverse society. Encouraging interfaith understanding through personal encounters allows them to flourish for the good of all.