# EMBRACING DISCOMFORT: BREXIT, GROUPTHINK AND THE CHALLENGE OF TRUE CRITICAL THINKING

## Martin Pollard

**Abstract:** This article argues that the left-liberal bias in the teaching profession can stifle genuine critical thinking amongst learners. Schools are increasingly committed to classroom debate about issues like Brexit, but should confront their own internal biases in order to make such debates effective. Methods such as Philosophy for Children, which encourage open-ended discussion and reflection, can support learners to articulate challenging viewpoints. The article argues that all educators should be open to changing their views, and should distinguish between 'disagreeable' views that are unacceptable, untrue or merely uncomfortable. Recognising that complex issues may have multiple internally coherent responses, and that not all 'acceptable' opinions are on the left of the political spectrum, is vital for encouraging genuine debate within development education.

**Key words:** Critical thinking; Controversy; Debate; Brexit; Political bias; Philosophy for Children; Argument; Reason.

## Introduction

At a conference in Bucharest recently, I was jolted out of my comfort zone. I was in a room with 60 or so educators from 21 countries. There we were, working on the kind of European Union (EU)-funded partnership projects that, we like to think, play a key role in supporting our young people to be internationally engaged, cosmopolitan citizens of tomorrow. With Wales in my heart but the United Kingdom on my badge, inevitably the topic of Brexit soon arose. 'Wasn't it terrible?', my colleagues sympathised. 'Didn't I despair of the democratic deficit that took us to this situation?' 'How could we continue positively after the UK had sailed off into isolationism?' A young guy from Macedonia begged to differ. Voting for

Brexit was, he said, the best thing the British public could have done. It meant freedom, the chance to set our own path, and delivering the UK from the shackles of a bureaucratic bloc that was doomed to die in any case.

Eyes widened; there were quizzical looks and sharp intakes of breath. How could this be said – at an EU-funded meeting of minds in an educational context by someone from a country whose own ambition is to join the group of 28 (soon 27)? This is speculation on my part, of course; I didn't ask what was behind those raised eyebrows. But it is not pure speculation to suggest that in teaching circles, especially in the UK, it has become received wisdom that Brexit will be a Very Bad Thing. Shortly before the UK 2016 referendum on membership of the EU, a poll showed that teachers would vote to 'remain' by a margin of 70 percent to 23 per cent. Even amongst the over-50's – the most ardent 'Brexiteers' in the general population – there was a clear majority. In addition, only 12 per cent of teachers believed Brexit would have a positive impact, compared to 51 per cent who felt it would be negative (Busby, 2016).

For development education, which purportedly prides itself on critical thinking and analysis of different perspectives, this received wisdom is worrying. In this article, I'll claim that to truly embrace critical thinking, educators need to be prepared for learners to hold views which they may find uncomfortable, but which may nonetheless be rational and internally coherent. I'll argue that a belief in fundamental values need not mean that everyone shares the same politics, and will call for educators themselves to examine their own values and beliefs, so that we engage with learners in a collective search for truth – whatever that may be.

## Groupthink

Just now I claimed that the kind of 'groupthink' exemplified by views on Brexit is a worrying development; it is not, however, a new one. I've had hundreds of conversations with teachers and other educationalists in the past 15 years, and it's fair to say that the stereotype of the 'liberal lefty'

teacher is relatively accurate. Teachers tend to be people who support the idea of the collective social good, and who think the government should spend more to equalise opportunities in society. Despite the ever-looming pressures of exam grades, I think most teachers would prefer to invest more effort in supporting children with fewer life chances to 'pull themselves up', rather than training a well-educated elite to boost their school's academic ranking. These types of views are why many teachers entered education in the first place, and they often go hand in hand with other manifestations of left-wing politics. Environmentalism, internationalism, unionisation – it would be a strange school, in the UK at least, which did not exhibit all of these traits in one form or another. I am not making the case that such political tendencies (which for the most part I share) are in themselves a damaging environment for education. But when these general traits spill over into groupthink on specific political issues, we have a problem. There is very little research out there on schoolteachers' political attitudes, though there is plenty about the left-liberal bias in higher education (e.g. Carol, 2017; Langbert et al., 2016). There are, however, many first-hand accounts which reinforce the stereotype: you could start with the story of the supply teacher who was sacked for defending Conservative policies (Baron, 2016); or the teacher writing anonymously in *The Guardian* (2017) to lambast his school for being a left-wing echo chamber that stifled meaningful discussion. This creates an uncomfortable environment for teachers themselves, who may hold other views but are reluctant to share them, up to the point of literally fearing for their career. But more importantly, groupthink amongst teachers risks choking off genuine, open-ended political discussion amongst students; when ideas become institutionalised, it's a tough task to remain completely neutral in the classroom. A cosy consensus, no matter how fundamentally humane or benevolent we believe it to be, does not look so cosy when it starts to bear the hallmarks of indoctrination.

This left-liberal bias is entrenched and persistent, despite prevailing right-wing governments in Europe, and the rise in popular nationalism across the world. In the UK it is challenged regularly by a predominantly right-wing press, controlled by right-wing business interests; though perhaps little attention is paid to such challenges by a young populace who are increasingly abandoning the dead tree press (YouGov/*The Guardian*, 2013: 5-9). The fact that the right holds such power within the media and politics might suggest that a bias to the left in our schools does not matter; or that it exists but is failing to indoctrinate our young. But I am not claiming a clear causal link between the views of teachers and those of learners, or that the environment of consensus and subtle indoctrination will necessarily influence learners' attitudes in the long term. Instead, my argument is that such an environment makes it more difficult for learners to confront global issues in a more genuinely critical way, evaluating competing viewpoints for their merits.

## The third sector and development education

To illustrate this challenge, allow me to make a detour for a moment. I no longer work in the education system, but in a charity that, among other things, promotes development education in Wales. In a non-profit world – the third sector, as we call it in the UK – which is every bit as left-leaning as the teaching profession, my social democratic views are quite mild. As a result, I have regularly embroiled myself in debates about issues on which third sector workers have their own echo chamber of acceptable views.

A good example is the controversy surrounding genetically modified (GM) foods. I agree with many of my colleagues that making widespread use of GM is not the only answer to solving global food security. There are significant practical challenges to making this technology work for the benefit of the world's poorest farmers. Nonetheless, I feel strongly that GM is an important part of the longer-term picture. The fervour with which many environmentalists argue against GM goes beyond the practical; they oppose GM on principle. I find

this unhelpful, and oddly irrational for environmentalists who are keen to espouse science when dealing with climate change sceptics.

I raise this issue not because I want readers to agree with me on GM foods but because I've experienced significant social pressure not to share these views; as if by holding a more nuanced, measured opinion about a key touchstone issue, I will somehow undermine a crusade. I've resisted these pressures, but it isn't always easy. Amongst environmentalists, opposing GM is an entrenched, institutionalised view that seems rarely to be debated in an open way. Even if the Soil Association or Friends of the Earth count pro-GM folk amongst their supporters, those individuals would need to be pretty hardy to challenge the consensus.

## Brexit

Now let us return to the school environment. In principle, I'm sure that most teachers accept the need to engender debate in the classroom. In recent years it has also become common practice for such discussion to move beyond the obvious places – for example, citizenship or civics classes, or perhaps English lessons where they can be used to test oral skills – and to take place as part of a school-wide commitment to communication skills or development education. On one level this is clearly a positive development, as it demonstrates an increasingly holistic, cross-curriculum approach to discussion and debate. And yet, to what extent are teachers being enabled to facilitate such discussions effectively? How many teachers feel genuinely able to put aside received wisdom and their own biases, and to tackle challenging issues in a way that is not only open (asking for different views) but open-ended (not requiring a particular conclusion)?

The topic of Brexit is a helpful example here. Around the time of the UK's referendum in the summer of 2016, I was told of an excellent debate that had taken place in one secondary school in Cardiff. Teams of pupils had researched arguments on both sides and the school had held a

mock referendum (I'm not sure who won). Yet I also heard from an education adviser who told me that she was surprised by the lack of engagement with this hugely important issue in other schools, as if its mere controversy was enough to discourage teachers from involving their students with it. Having spoken to many teachers since then, and not found a single pro-Brexit voice amongst those who have expressed a view, I'd suggest that groupthink also played a part.

In an opinion piece for the *Daily Mail*, Calvin Robinson (2017), a teacher in North London, discusses the 'impulse towards the censorship of views that did not fit the progressive orthodoxy… Only Brexiteers were to be silenced'. For sure, the *Mail* is a right-wing mouthpiece that regularly features claims about 'brainwashing' in schools. That, though, should not diminish the relevance of Mr Robinson's views. He also recalls a teaching aid to help learners understand the difference between the political left and right:

> "…this document told students that Left-wing meant 'the NHS', 'helping people' and the theory that 'everyone should be equal'. Right-wing meant 'Hitler', 'less help for people' and a rejection of equality…" (Robinson, 2017).

Such examples may be isolated, but I would hazard a guess that they are not. Since the referendum, most Brexit opponents I have met – overwhelmingly good, honest people with sincere intentions – bluntly believe that 'Brexiteers' are racist, stupid or both. Because voting to leave the EU is so far beyond the pale, it is impossible for many to imagine that such individuals have rational, non-prejudiced motives for their beliefs. This is exacerbated by the fact that the most vocal Brexiteers are on the political right, already viewed by many left-wingers as a refuge for racists and scoundrels.

## Philosophy for Children methodology

Combined, this set of circumstances creates a significant barrier to debate in the classroom. To create the conditions for a truly open-ended debate, teachers must cast aside their personal political biases, the collective bias of the school environment, and the surrounding ideological prejudices that the left creates about the right. This is tough but possible; there are excellent methodologies available to develop just this kind of environment. My own experience centres on the Philosophy for Children approach (also known as Communities of Inquiry), which casts the teacher as a neutral but supportive 'facilitator' of dialogue focused on the learners' own open-ended questions. It emphasises the social aspects of learning (caring and collaboration) as well as critical and creative thinking, and encourages both learners and teachers to make space for reflection and evaluation. Philosophy for Children is supported by considerable academic research (SAPERE, 2015), but it does ask schools to make a significant commitment to professional development, because this 'neutral' role is not one that comes naturally to us all.

Some will argue that 'neutrality' has the potential to lessen the impact of development education; that learners should, in fact, be encouraged to take the side of global justice and equality, and to stand against unfairness, intolerance and bigotry. However, this claim is effectively only stating that schools should encourage learners to be 'good', ethical people; something it is hard to argue against. My aim here is specifically to address the problem of political bias in schools, not to propose that schools become centres for amoral, conceptual pontification.

Indeed, few Philosophy for Children practitioners would argue for some sort of context-free, 'neutral' environment in which all opinions go unchallenged as part of some therapeutic self-affirmation exercise. Such an approach would devalue rationality and the search for truth, and would clearly fail to develop learners' thinking skills. In the UK, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has a legally mandated commitment to what is called 'impartiality'. As a result, Britain's state broadcaster faces

continual, politically motivated sniping about its failure to uphold these standards; it also ends up giving air time to climate change deniers because this is thought to introduce balance into a purportedly controversial debate.

Instead, learners need support to develop higher-order reasoning skills alongside a keen appreciation – but not necessarily acceptance – of their peers' different stances on globally important issues. The school environment should empower them to probe, to contemplate, and to articulate potentially challenging viewpoints; and to feel confident in changing their view based on rational considerations, not on the peer pressure created by prevailing political winds. If this process is successful and teachers find the resulting opinions difficult to accept, then so much the better: our goal should be to create independent thinkers who can engage with the world in new ways, not clones of ourselves. In fact, I've met excellent teachers who enthuse about their learners' ability to persuade them of a different view. A continual refinement of views and values is essential for an enquiring mind, whatever our age or experience; it also feels liberating. 'Stop thinking that you have all the answers' is stock advice in self-help books for a good reason.

## Unacceptable, untrue, or uncomfortable?

We disagree with people for various good reasons. Here's a useful piece of advice for teachers (or indeed anyone – try playing this game when you read the latest tweets from Donald Trump). The next time you hear an opinion you disagree with, try to categorise it: is the opinion unacceptable, untrue, or uncomfortable? Of course, there is considerable interplay and overlap between these categories. To ground the point more clearly in development education practice, let's take the example of a classic 'controversial' issue – migration.

If an opinion is **unacceptable**, that might mean that the person expressing it has gone too far. No-one wants schools to be places where obviously extreme views go unchallenged. If, during a class discussion on

migration, a learner puts forward an opinion based on plain racism (for example, accusing people of a particular ethnicity of being lazy or deceitful), it will be unacceptable to most and should be treated as such. If things get extreme, many schools will have existing policies on how to deal formally with such expressions of prejudice. Ideally, though, discriminatory speech will be dealt with by other learners calling it out – a good sign of a healthily functioning environment for classroom debate.

While schools should welcome a diversity of views, they should not depart from certain fundamental principles that guide their work, or that underpin a positive development education programme. It seems to me that respect for human rights is one such key pillar: a non-negotiable factor in encouraging positive global citizenship, which should not be subject to the whims of cultural relativism. As a subset of human rights, a commitment to equality and (some version of) democratic participation also seem to me to be clearly desirable.

If the learner's opinion seems to be **untrue**, that is a different matter. An important principle of rational debate is that a claim can be verified by hard facts. Take, for example, the claim (often repeated by the media in the UK) that an unfair or overwhelming number of asylum seekers are arriving on our shores. Learners may need support to discover the fact that (say) in the last hour, 1,200 people worldwide have been newly displaced from their homes, but only four of them have arrived in the UK; or that the UK only received 3 per cent of EU asylum applications in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017). But these are facts and they certainly have a bearing on what you might call the 'range' of sensible views that one might hold on this topic.

In a social media age in which 'fake news' allegations have become part of the daily currency of political discourse, it is all the more critical – but also more challenging – for learners to be able to judge the credibility of information they access. A Stanford University report in 2016 found a 'dismaying inability by students to reason about information

they see on the Internet', and warned against the assumption that 'because young people are fluent in social media they are equally perceptive about what they find there' (cited in Donald, 2016).

So, opinions founded on prejudice or lies can justifiably be said to invite challenge or correction. On the other hand, if an opinion is **uncomfortable**, that's where the real soul-searching might be found. If a learner tells me that they think immigration should be reduced, or that we should reduce rather than increase our commitment to resettle refugees, my instinct is to immediately disagree with them. Being of the classic left-liberal persuasion, I fundamentally believe that immigration is a good thing, both culturally and economically, and frankly I savour the opportunity to assert this point to anyone who will listen (and a few who won't). But what if my fellow interlocutor has a more nuanced view? What if, in fact, they are making a claim about the damaging 'brain drain' of qualified medical practitioners to Europe from developing countries, or suggesting that it's better to fund neighbouring countries to support refugees than to bolster dangerous people-trafficking routes into Europe?

Or what if our learner is not saying either of those things? What if their considered view – which is shared by three-quarters of the British population (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2013) – is that there are too many immigrants or refugees in the UK, based on a different interpretation of the economics or a concern about the capacity of government services? Or what if they're making a subtler cultural point about the changing demographics of the UK, which cannot be simply labelled as xenophobic? These are not – or at least not necessarily – incoherent or irrational arguments. They may be more readily associated with people on the right of the political spectrum, but even this is probably a misperception on the part of the liberal left. The British Labour Party's traditional working-class voters form a significant section of those seven-tenths of the British public who want immigration to be reduced, and even under Jeremy Corbyn's strongly left-wing leadership, the party has hardly been unequivocal in its support of immigration (Chessum, 2017).

The same questions can be applied to discussions about Brexit, or about the Trump administration in the United States. Just as it is unhelpful to assume arguments against increased immigration are racist, so it is lazily intolerant to write off both Brexit and Trump (both of which secured popular democratic support) as merely symptoms of ignorance and prejudice. To do so is not only unnecessarily offensive to large swathes of the population, but risks undermining the practices of critical thinking, empathy and reflection that are so critical to development education.

To approach controversial issues in development education, we therefore need to encourage discussions that are based on verifiable facts; grounded in respect for equality and human rights; and aimed at promoting a positive sense of global citizenship. Beyond this, we should not be limiting our learners' capacity for critical thinking and reaching their own judgements about issues that are by nature complex and contested. And while there may be no way around the teaching profession's left-liberal bias, it is a bias that many of us need to recognise in ourselves, so that we can act positively to counteract its potentially pernicious effects.

When we talk about critical thinking, we should not use this as a euphemism for a series of discussions aimed at bringing learners around to our way of thinking. We should not accept an environment in which uncomfortable views are quashed by disapproval, rather than challenged through critical analysis. We should promote robust but respectful dialogue, and both teachers and students should learn to embrace discomfort and the possibility of change.

## References

Baron, J (2016) 'To survive as a Tory teacher, you have to keep quiet', 16 June, *The Spectator*, available: https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/02/to-survive-as-a-tory-teacher-you-have-to-keep-quiet/ (accessed 5 December 2017).

British Social Attitudes Survey (2013) cited in 'Preferences for reduced migration are not new', The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, available:

http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/ (accessed 5 December 2017).

Busby, E (2016) 'Exclusive new survey shows clear majority of teachers want to remain in the EU', *TES*, available: https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/exclusive-new-survey-shows-clear-majority-teachers-want-remain-eu (accessed 5 December 2017).

Carol, N (2017) *Why Do Academics Lean Left?*, Adam Smith Institute, available: https://www.adamsmith.org/news/groupthink-rife-in-british-academia-new-asi-report (accessed 1 February 2018).

Chessum, M (2017) 'Labour has quietly shifted to the right on immigration – with troubling consequences', 6 June, *New Statesman*, available: https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2017/06/labour-has-quietly-shifted-right-immigration-troubling-consequences (accessed 6 December 2017).

Donald, B (2016) 'Stanford researchers find students have trouble judging the credibility of information online. Stanford Graduate School of Education', available: https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online (accessed 6 December 2017).

Langbert, M, Quain, A J and Klein, D B (2016) 'Faculty Voter Registration in Economics, History, Journalism, Law, and Psychology', *Econ Journal Watch*, available: https://econjwatch.org/articles/faculty-voter-registration-in-economics-history-journalism-communications-law-and-psychology (accessed 1 February 2018).

Robinson, C (2017) '"Don't mention Brexit and don't support the Tories": London school teacher reveals horror at how the Left are brainwashing our children', *Daily Mail*, 6 December, available: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4705532/London-teacher-reveals-Left-brainwashing-children.html (accessed 5 December 2017).

SAPERE (2015) ‘Philosophy for Children Research Summary’, available: http://www.sapere.org.uk/AboutP4C/P4CImpact/P4CResearch.aspx (accessed 5 December 2017).

*The Guardian* (2017) ‘Secret Teacher: My school is an echo-chamber for leftwing views’, 24 June, available: https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2017/jun/24/secret-teacher-school-echo-chamber-leftwing-views-labour (accessed 5 December 2017).

UNHCR (2017) *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, pp. 7, 60-70, available: http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016/ (accessed 5 December 2017).

YouGov/*The Guardian* (2013) *Britain’s Changing Media Habits*, available: http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/jrlh273vq2/YG-G-Changing-Media-Summit-Report-PARTI.pdf (accessed 1 February 2018).

**Martin Pollard** is Chief Executive of the Welsh Centre for International Affairs, a charity based in Cardiff whose mission is to inspire learning and action on global issues. A former English teacher, he has worked for 17 years in the field of development education, and has specialist interests in debating and the Philosophy for Children pedagogy. He chairs the Wales Alliance for Global Learning, represents Wales on the UK Development Education Network, and sits on the Welsh Government’s Third Sector Partnership Council.

**Contact:**
Welsh Centre for International Affairs
Temple of Peace
Cathays Park
CF10 3AP
Wales, UK

Tel: +44 (0)29 2082 1053
Email: martinpollard@wcia.org.uk