

## Teaching About Controversial Issues ~ Handout to complement Webinar CPD Module

### Classroom teaching and learning

Teachers can use enquiry-based learning, effective questioning and a range of teaching and learning approaches when teaching about controversial issues. Teachers should provide opportunities for pupils to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and capabilities to deepen their understanding of controversial issues.

### Learning through enquiry

When pupils have limited experience of using enquiry-based tasks to explore controversial issues, teachers could begin with a structured enquiry. Teachers could then move them on to guided or open enquiry tasks as they gain more experience and skills. When planning an enquiry, teachers can identify some aspects of skills and capabilities to focus on alongside developing the pupils' knowledge and understanding about controversial issues.

### Deciding on the enquiry focus

When planning the enquiry, the teacher could:

- contextualise the enquiry within a conceptual framework, such as within a human rights framework; •consider the controversial issue at a global level and make comparisons at a local level;
- use effective questioning to find out pupils' prior learning;
- use Know, Want to Know and Learn (KWL) activities to access pupils' prior learning and to create
- questions and enquiry options to explore; and
- use the No Easy Answers Board activity to generate questions to explore.

### Pupil activities

Once the teacher and pupils have identified the focus of the enquiry the pupils need to discuss and agree on what activities or tasks they need to carry out. They should identify what they need to do and plan their work accordingly.

### Working with Others

The enquiry process and associated activities provide a range of opportunities for pupils to work with others. Working with others is an important part of developing a deeper understanding about controversial issues. Teachers could identify and plan activities to develop aspects of these capabilities. For example, teachers can provide opportunities for pupils to:

- work collaboratively;
- agree on goals and ways of working;
- share ideas, views and opinions;
- learn with and from others; and
- actively listen to and respond to others in constructive and respectful ways.

### Managing Information

A central part of exploring controversial issues involves researching, gathering, selecting, adapting, and recording information. Teachers can use a range of active teaching and learning approaches to support pupils to develop their skills to manage information including:

- graffiti boards
- carousel
- post-it collections
- Plus, Minus and Interesting (PMI).
- Critical thinking

Teachers should encourage pupils to think critically throughout the controversial issue enquiry and to be particularly critical when examining evidence and drawing conclusions. When pupils are examining their evidence, the teacher should provide opportunities for them to:

- analyse controversial issues;
- share, discuss and challenge each other's information, ideas and feelings;
- review and evaluate their sources of information;
- identify stereotyping, bias, prejudice and hidden agendas;
- explore their evidence from different viewpoints;
- recognise the strengths and weaknesses of their evidence/position;
- use the evidence to develop a line of reasoning;
- explore the causes and consequences;
- draw justified conclusions; and
- evaluate ways to affect change or resolve the issue.

### Debriefing

Debriefing is a vital part of the learning process and provides an opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation. The teacher could consider asking pupils:

- Were you able to see the main points in the argument?
- What was your thinking when you had to present the other side of the argument?
- What were your thoughts about other people's views?
- Did you find it difficult to listen to someone from the opposing side making their points?

- Why is it important to learn to disagree with one another respectfully?
- How might you react differently next time?

### Planning effective questioning

Teachers should plan effective questioning to encourage all pupils to become fully involved in the learning process. Teachers can support pupils to do so. When planning effective questioning, teachers can:

- use the Bloom's Taxonomy
- create a range of questions from simple to complex;
- ask questions that stimulate thinking about an issue;
- ensure that the questions are matched appropriately to the pupils' ability range;
- think about the type of questions and key questions to ask;
- think through possible pupil responses and their own; and
- have model answers to help illustrate and explain more difficult concepts or ideas.

### Using effective questioning techniques

Teachers may find the following techniques helpful when using effective questioning:

- At the start of the activity, ask big questions about the controversial issues.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Sequence and ask questions that range in their level of challenge.
- Ask different pupils questions.
- Use questions to build on pupils' ideas.
- Give pupils time to think before responding to the question. If pupils do not respond, do not give the answer - ask a prompt question instead.
- Use focus questions - if a pupil is having difficulty answering a question, support the pupil by leading her or him through the steps to find the answer.
- Use the 'no hands up' rule, mini-whiteboards or digital voting systems.
- Use 'phone a friend' - if a pupil cannot answer a question, allow them to nominate a friend to answer.
- Use 'hot-seating' - a pupil agrees to sit on the hot-seat and take questions from pupils and the teacher.
- Preview - display and share questions that you will ask at the start of the lesson.
- Use pair rehearsal - pupils discuss the question and agree their responses.
- Target questions to groups - listen to group discussions and ask the group specific questions.
- Use developed questions - pupils have to answer the question using key words or phrases or expand on previous responses.

## Listening Triads

- Two people talk, discussing an issue whilst one listens, encourages reflective dialogue. Share discussions and points of views with whole class

## Peer questions and Envoying

- Generate questions which are open ended from pupils gives them ownership of the discussion. Group could generate a load of questions and then choose three to discuss. Person to take a question and then move from group to group. Finally, the person goes back to original group and feeds back discussion points raised.

## Active Teaching and Learning Methods

### Analysing text

An important part of the enquiry process is analysing information and evidence, including texts.

### Questioning the author

Teachers can use this method with pupils to critically analyse a text/book. It requires pupils to think about the text/book and how it was written for audience and purpose. Pupils create a list of questions that they would like to ask the author. These could include:

- What is your own view on the issue?
- Why did you write the piece?
- Is it written from a particular perspective?
- Whose views are not represented in the text? Why?
- Why did you describe xxx as yyy?
- What choices did you make about what to include and what to leave out?
- How did you present the controversial issue?
- You have selected information to present ideas or characters in a certain way. Why?

As a debrief teachers could explore how the text/book influenced pupils' thinking, views and attitudes. They could consider what new insights pupils gained. Pupils could reflect on why it is important to critically question all sources of information.

### Analysing writing

Teachers can use the language bag as another approach to develop pupils' vocabulary and ability to analyse complex information. Teachers place a selection of words in the bag which can be used, for example, to describe the author's tone or meaning. This is

important because the way an article is written, and its tone can have implicit meaning. Pupils need to be aware that the way in which information is written can lead to their interpreting the meaning differently, which can create controversy.

In this activity the teacher asks different pupils to read an extract from a source text aloud. Reading aloud can help pupils to think about the tone, punctuation and emphasis of the piece. Pupils are given time to read the source and to think about its meaning. The teacher then asks a pupil to read aloud.

This pupil uses their own words to describe the tone, or they can choose a word from the language bag, but they don't tell the class which word they have chosen. The pupil then reads the text using that tone. Other pupils guess which word best describes the reader's tone. By using the same source and different groups of pupils, the teacher can illustrate how the tone can vary within the text, and how the pupils can interpret the text in different ways.

### Analysing images

Teachers can use this approach as a stimulus for the class to discuss a controversial issue. Teachers can select some images, perhaps choosing the ones most likely to provoke debate. The teacher displays a photograph on a whiteboard and uses effective questioning to explore pupils' views. They allow pupils a few minutes to study, ask questions and think about the source. The teacher then asks pupils not to make any initial interpretations about the source, and to respond to the following questions:

- What do you see?
- What stands out in the source?
- What questions do you need answered before you can interpret the photograph?

Pupils can think about and make a list of questions using the fiveWs as a framework:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?

Pupils discuss their questions with two others in the class to try to explore answers. The teacher could also use prompts to stimulate discussion about the image such as:

- I think the artist is saying ...
- The intended audience is ...
- The image makes me think about ...
- The image makes me feel...

Pupils refer to the detail in the image to justify their views and support this by using background knowledge and understanding.

### **Slow reveal**

Teachers can use the slow reveal of an image to stimulate pupils' curiosity. This can be a useful lead into exploring a controversial issue. The slow reveal is when the teacher reveals small portions of an image at a time. The teacher decides which section of the image to show first, next and so on, and plans questions to ask at each point, perhaps giving clues. As a debrief the teacher can focus on how pupils' interpretation of the image changes as more of the image is revealed. It can be useful to focus on which point pupils' perceptions begin to change, and why.

### **Exploring multiple perspectives**

If pupils are to develop a deeper understanding about a controversial issue, they need to explore the issue from a range of different viewpoints. Below are some approaches teachers can use.

### **Spectrum debate**

The spectrum debate is a method that teachers can use with pupils to explore a controversial issue from different perspectives. Pupils position themselves along a line. Each end of the line represents the extremes of the two viewpoints. Pupils stand at the point on the line where they think that their opinion would lie. The teacher then asks the pupils to use their evidence to justify their position on the line.

### **Line of continuum**

This is a variation of the spectrum debate. Create a line of pupils in the classroom as before. One end is positive and could be labelled, for example: 'strongest evidence for', or 'certain', or 'non-threatening'. The other end of the line is negative and might be labelled: 'threatening', or 'strongest evidence against', or 'uncertain'. Teachers follow the steps below:

- Allow time for pupils to reflect on their views.
- Ask pupils to stand on a position on the line which best represents their views.
- Facilitate class discussion.
- Ask pupils to provide justified reasons for their position on the line.
- Ensure that pupils listen to the views of others.
- Allow time for pupils to reflect and reconsider their views or position.
- Give pupils the opportunity to move to a different place on the line. Debrief.

### **Washing line**

The teacher attaches a piece of string to either end of a classroom wall and places a controversial issue-based question on the middle of the line. The teacher then follows the steps below.

- Ask the pupils to pin their evidence for or against an argument or position on the line.
- Ask the pupils to record and interpret the class information.
- Ask the pupils to review and build on their argument.
- Ask the pupils to use the information to plan, construct and produce an extended piece of writing.
- Debrief.

### **Role on the wall:**

This strategy can be used to represent a real or fictional character. A simple outline is drawn on the wall in the space around pupils write all the things they know about the character on the outside of the outline. They can also put questions that they want answered, in the space within the outline they write words that describe how the character is feeling. The 'Role on the wall' can be kept as a living commentary and the character can be revisited

### **Agree/Disagree**

Another way a teacher can stimulate debate about a controversial issue is by reading out statements and then asking pupils to stand at certain points in the room if they agree, disagree, or are unsure. Then, facilitate discussion so that pupils can explain their thinking and views about an issue.

### **Post-it barometer**

Teachers may use this approach to show the range of views or agreement within the class on a controversial issue. The teacher draws a continuum line on the board. Pupils write down points on a post-it and place it on the line of continuum according to their opinion. Pupils then discuss the variation of responses and extent of agreement/disagreement within the class.

### **Diamond nine**

Develops dialogic talk, it also forces the need to achieve consensus and negotiate disagreements. Teacher in advance prepares nine cards (quotes, pictures, cartoons). In groups cards are read and discussed and then arranged in a diamond shape with the statements they most agree with at the top and the least at the bottom. Involves weighing up different points of views, pupils made to think logically and deal with any dissent. This is useful to do as a whole class discussion on a topic as it helps pupils

to negotiate, influence and persuade others about the order of the statements and finally to reach consensus. They may find that it is not always possible to reach consensus.

### Using drama techniques to promote discussion

Drama and role-play are a useful way to explore controversial issues. Pupils may feel less vulnerable when expressing their ideas through a character in a role-play. The following are some examples of drama techniques:

#### **Freeze frame**

Still picture, still image, tableau - a three-dimensional picture using body language, facial expressions and space to convey meaning. This is especially useful for explaining pivotal moments in a narrative or in pupil's lives. In the freeze frame activity pupils work in small groups. Give them an event or situation associated with controversial issues. Pupils then discuss what they are being asked to do and how they will create a freeze frame. In turn, each group gets into and holds their position for a few minutes, while other pupils observe and discuss. The teacher can extend this activity; groups could enact different stages of a particular issue and take photos. They could create a photo story. Photographs taken during a freeze frame and then discussed afterwards are very valuable and captions can be used alongside

#### **Role play**

Teacher or pupils take on a role in an imagined situation. Writing in role: pupils create a document from a perspective of a character or person other than themselves

#### **Conscience alley**

Conscience alley is an approach which allows pupils to explore different perspectives on an issue. In this activity pupils are given a role and asked to state how their character feels about a particular issue or situation. The focus of the activity may be on making a difficult decision. Pupils form two lines facing each other, leaving space for another pupil to walk from one end to the other. The pupil in character walks between the two rows of pupils who take on the role of protagonists. One row of protagonists supports one view about the issue while the others hold an opposing view. As the pupil walks along the 'alley' the other pupils offer advice or call out their thoughts or feelings about the issue. The pupil walking through the 'alley' then has to come to a decision at the end of their journey.

#### **Mantle of the expert**

This technique was developed by Dorothy Heathcote through work with children and teachers. This gives pupils a fictional 'frame' within which they can take responsibility for a situation. Pupils are given 'expert' information, or they may research the information in advance, participants assume responsibility for the activity. The



situation is usually task orientated, power and responsibility move from teacher to pupils. In this activity pupils take on the role of an expert and view an issue from this perspective. The teacher asks the pupils to get into groups and research a controversial issue. They then present their 'expert' view for the benefit of the stakeholder or client.

### **Hot seating**

Hot seating is an effective questioning technique which teachers can use to explore a controversial issue through role-play. Group prepare questions to ask the person in the hot seat, it is best to do this activity in groups first before shifting the hot seating to the front of the class. A pupil takes on the role of protagonist and agrees to answer questions from the class in this role. The teacher can use this approach to explore the protagonist's views and feelings about an issue. It helps pupils to place themselves in the position of another and to see issues from a different perspective.

### **Thought Tracking**

This is a reflective technique which interrupts a piece of drama in order that pupils can reflect on what's happening. Groups are asked to improvise from the point of interruption, the action is then stopped and the teacher process by asking actors what they are thinking of and what are their motivation at that point in the drama

### **Take the Power**

Many controversial issues have a power relationship between groups. This drama technique draws out the power relationships in a situation. And ask participants how power relationships can be changed. For example, start with a scenario from a novel, group can develop a tableau which shows the power relationships. A pupil has to enter the group and they take up a position in the group which changes the power balance.

### **Communicating findings and ideas**

Teachers could discuss with pupils the different ways of communicating their findings, ideas, views and opinions. For example, pupils could do this in writing or by participating in discussions, debates and role-plays. Teachers could focus on developing certain aspects of pupils' communication skills. The following are some examples of communication-based activities:

#### **Structured discussion**

The teacher could use a structured approach to support pupils to participate in discussion about controversial issues. The teacher could use the following approaches. This approach differs from the usual form of debate as it allows pupils to experience both sides of an issue before making a stand themselves.

### Example 1

Pupils work in pairs or groups to explore a question from different viewpoints.

1. The teacher discusses a controversial issue with the pupils.
2. The pupils use KWL to generate questions to explore.
3. The pupils agree on questions for discussion.
4. In groups, half the class researches one viewpoint while the other half considers an opposing viewpoint.
5. Each group constructs and presents their argument.
6. The groups swap positions on the issue and argue from an opposing perspective.

### Example 2

1. The class is split - half of the pupils read and discuss material supporting one position in pairs, while the other half considers the opposing view.
2. Pairs of pupils with opposing views exchange and share views.
3. The pupils critically evaluate the opposing positions.
4. Pairs of pupils present the view of the opposing pair.
5. There is a class discussion to reach consensus in favour of a position.

### Writing a report

The teacher can use the structured discussion activity to prepare pupils to produce an extended piece of writing. They could present this as a report. The teacher can support pupils to focus their report by asking key questions:

- What is the issue?
- What is the pro position?
- What is the con position?
- What side did you support before you read the material?
- What facts support the pro/con views?
- What opinions support the pro/con views?
- What would be the benefits of adopting the pro/con views?
- What are the consequences of adapting the pro/con views?
- Who or which groups stand to gain from supporting the pro/con views?

The teacher can use a wheel of consequence activity to help pupils to make connections between the actions and their consequences.

### Silent Conversation/Dialogue

In this method pupils have a silent conversation in writing with others. They work in pairs or small groups. Having a written conversation gives pupils more time to think about what they want to say than they would in a normal conversation. It means they have to focus on others' views. The silent conversation also allows pupils to keep a visual

record of their thinking, views, feelings and questions. This can be explored through further discussion. The teacher might find the following approach useful:

- Give each pair/group a sheet of flip chart paper with the conversation stimulus placed in the centre.
- Give the pupils time to read the text and additional 'conversation' time.
- Using a different coloured marker, the pupils in each group highlight and annotate key points on the source and write down their views and ideas.
- Encourage pupils to ask questions, to clarify points and to seek further information (in silence).
- When each group has recorded their comments, they pass the paper to another group to comment on, and so on.

The teacher can vary the activity by adding questions or information to develop the conversation.

- The teacher can facilitate a discussion when all groups have reviewed each other's work.
- The teacher can vary this activity by including a gallery walk: pupils display the group conversations on the classroom walls. Pupils then read each conversation and comment.

### Managing discussions

Teachers may find managing pupils' emotional responses arising from discussion about a controversial issue challenging. Therefore, it is important that they recognise different emotional responses, and knowhow to deal with them. Below are some of the emotional responses' pupils might display.

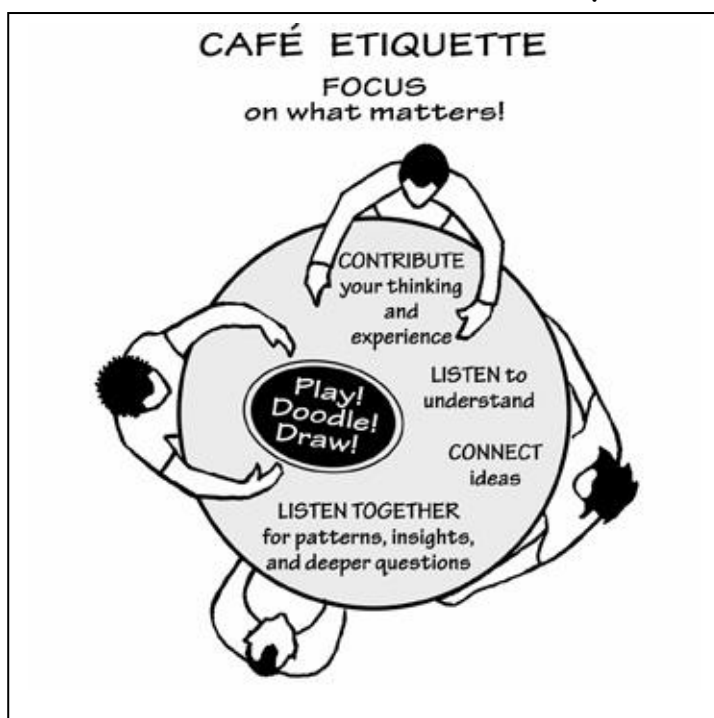
- Silence - non-responsive
- A feeling of tension - ready to 'attack'
- Attacking - responding with the intent to hurt others
- Laughing - not sure how else to respond or showing disrespect
- A side commentary - provides a running commentary
- Internalising - taking comments personally, believing something to be true
- Confusion/frustration - angry, hurt, annoyed but not sure why
- Naming - identifying the problem or source of annoyance
- Confronting - demanding that the behaviour or the source of upset is dealt with
- Humour - responding with a humorous comment: can be constructive or can be laughing at someone else's expense
- Using discretion - saving comments for another time.

When managing discussions teachers might find the following approaches helpful:

- Establish and remind pupils about ground rules for discussion.

- Depersonalise the issue by using: case studies, card sorting activities or drama role-play.
- Focus on facts and evidence rather than opinion.
- Using 'time out,' pause the discussion. Give pupils time to think and calm down. Rather than pick up the discussion at the point it was paused, you can open the discussion from a different perspective.
- Use journals. Give pupils time to write down their thoughts and feelings in a journal. You can restart the discussion with pupils reflecting on and sharing their ideas and feelings. The teacher can focus on the consequences of pupil comments.

## Instructions for World Café Activity



### The World Café<sup>1</sup>

The World Café is a simple way of having a conversation around an important question. The room will be set up to resemble a café setting with people seated around the tables. Each table has a paper tablecloth and the discussion is captured by writing or drawing directly onto the cloth. The conversations around the tables should link and build on each other as people move round the table. At the end of the process the main ideas will be captured for the final plenary session.

### So how does it work?

1. In groups discuss the statement (one of the five principles) which is placed in the centre of the table cloth.
2. Participants will have approx. 5 minutes to discuss ideas related to the theme and to write down their ideas on the tablecloth - don't worry about being wrong.
3. After 5 minutes move onto the next table, one person must stay behind to briefly explain what has happened so far, before re-joining their group.
4. Add ideas to the tablecloth (5 minutes).
5. After 5 minutes move on to the next tablecloth - leaving a different person behind to recap.
6. And so on, until everyone has contributed to all of the tablecloth themes.

Everyone around the table is encouraged to contribute to the discussion. As the discussion progresses key points and thoughts can be captured on the tablecloth using the pens provided. At the end of the session a short discussion can be had on the themes and issues raised.

### Process

World Café session helps participants listen together, it contributes towards thinking and helps focus individuals in being able to express their own ideas. This is a very useful starting point when processing concepts or issues. This is an excellent approach to use with pupils.

<sup>1</sup> For further details see [www.worldcafe.org](http://www.worldcafe.org)

<b>Stated Commitment:</b>	
<b>In which the teacher always makes known his/her views during discussion</b>	
<b>Potential strengths</b>	<b>Potential weaknesses</b>
<p>Pupils will try to guess what the teacher thinks anyway. Stating your own position makes everything above board.</p> <p>If pupils know where the teacher stands on the issue, they can discount his or her prejudices and biases.</p> <p>It's better to state your preferences after discussion rather than before.</p> <p>It should only be used if pupils' dissenting opinions are treated with respect.</p> <p>It can be an excellent way of maintaining credibility with pupils since they do not expect us to be neutral</p>	<p>It can stifle classroom discussion, inhibiting pupils from arguing a line against that of the teachers.</p> <p>It may encourage some pupils to argue strongly for something they don't believe in simply because it's different from what the teacher thinks.</p> <p>Pupils often find it difficult to distinguish facts from values. It's even more difficult if the purveyor of facts and values is the same person, i.e. the teacher.</p>

<b>Stated neutrality:</b>	
<b>In which the teacher adopts role of an impartial chairperson of a discussion group.</b>	
<b>Potential strengths</b>	<b>Potential weaknesses</b>
<p>Minimizes undue influence of teacher's own bias.</p> <p>Gives everyone a chance to take part in free discussion.</p> <p>Provides scope for open-ended discussion, ie the class may move on to consider issues and questions the teacher hasn't thought of.</p> <p>Present a good opportunity for pupils to exercise communication skills.</p> <p>Works well if you have a lot of background material</p>	<p>Pupils find it artificial.</p> <p>Can damage the rapport between teacher and class if it doesn't work.</p> <p>Depends on pupils being familiar with the method elsewhere in the school or it will take a long time to acclimatize them.</p> <p>May only reinforce pupils' existing attitudes and prejudices.</p> <p>Very difficult with the less able.</p> <p>The role of neutral chair doesn't suit the teacher's personality.</p>

<b>A Balanced Approach:</b>	
<b>In which the teacher presents pupils with a wide range of alternative views.</b>	
<b>Potential strengths</b>	<b>Potential weaknesses</b>
<p>Essential: I think one of the main functions of a humanities or social studies teacher is to show that issues are hardly ever black and white.</p> <p>Necessary when the class is polarized on an issue.</p> <p>Most useful when dealing with issues about which there is a great deal of conflicting information.</p> <p>If a balanced range of opinion does not emerge from the group, then it is up to the teacher to see that the other aspects are brought out.</p>	<p>Is there such a thing as a balanced range of opinions?</p> <p>As a strategy it has limited use. It avoids the main point of conveying the impression that 'truth' is a grey area that exists between two alternative sets of opinions.</p> <p>Balance means very different things to different people. The BBC's view of balance is not mine. Teaching is rarely value free.</p> <p>This approach can lead to very teacher-directed lessons. As with BBC interviews you are always chipping in to maintain the so-called balance.</p>

<b>The Devil's Advocate Strategy:</b>	
<b>In which the teacher consciously takes up the opposite position to the one expressed by pupils or in teaching materials.</b>	
<b>Potential strengths</b>	<b>Potential weaknesses</b>
<p>Frequently used by me. Great fun and can be very effective in stimulating the pupils to contribute to discussion.</p> <p>Essential when faced by a group who all seem to share the same opinion.</p> <p>Most classes which I have taught seem to have a majority line. Then I use this strategy and parody, exaggeration, and role reversal.</p> <p>I often use this as a device to liven things up when the discussion is beginning to dry up.</p>	<p>I have run into all sorts of problems with this approach: kids identifying me with the view I was putting forward as devil's advocate; parents worried about my alleged views, etc.</p> <p>It may reinforce pupils' prejudices.</p> <p>Only to be used when discussion dries up and there are still 25 minutes left.</p>

Source adapted from 'Towards Umbuntu', TIDE~ 2003