

Challenging Conventional Ideas *

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For: teenagers to adults

Level: intermediate +

Time: 1 hour approx. (with extension: 2-3 hours)

Aims: to introduce the topic of received opinions and to practice challenging these

Lead-in

1. Write on the board / dictate some received opinions. You can also throw in some inoffensive conventional wisdoms about different nationalities. Some examples:
 - Politicians can't be trusted.
 - Pop culture promotes violence.
 - British food is awful.
 - Germans are always incredibly punctual.
 - Mexicans drink a lot.
 - Japanese people take more photographs than other nationalities.
 - Homosexuals are effeminate.
2. Ask your class what is the connection between these statements.
3. Elicit the idea of a **received opinion, conventional wisdom, a clichéd idea, an assumption** and explain what these mean. See if the group can guess what verbs collocate with these expressions.
4. Ask everyone in the class to write down two more received opinions. One should be about **their** country / culture (e.g. Italians eat only pizza and pasta) and one about the world in general.
5. Ask for examples of conventional opinions they've come up with but don't discuss them at this point.
6. Now write on board: Galileo, Nelson Mandela, Joan of Arc, Charles Darwin, Copernicus, and elicit the connection / add extra names.¹

*A Radio 4 programme of the same name inspired this idea: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/comedy/heresy.shtml>
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¹answer: They were all **heretics**, people who **committed heresy / went against the status quo / questioned the assumptions of their society** at the time. (I know that Mandela isn't strictly speaking a 'heretic' in traditional sense, but you might like to point out to your class that today 'heresy can be without a religious context as the holding of ideas that are in fundamental disagreement with the status quo in any practice and branch of knowledge' (*Wikipedia, Heresy*).

Preparation for speaking

1. Tell class that they're going to have the opportunity to challenge some received opinions.
2. Ask them to prepare a short 30 second speech arguing **against** the two opinions they've written down, or any two from the board. They may want to use some of these phrases:
 - *The reason we have this opinion ... is because ...*
 - *The truth of the matter is ...*
 - *This opinion / idea / notion is true to a certain extent ... However ...*
 - *Take for example ...*
 - *The problem is that ...*
 - *In actual fact ...*
3. Give them a model 30 second speech using one of your original received opinions and some / all of the phrases above. Choose a conventional wisdom that most of the class would support: e.g. British food is awful.

Speaking

After five minutes of preparation, explain that one heretic will argue against a received opinion whilst everyone else must support the conventional wisdom. Give an example with your 'British food model' and encourage the group to challenge you. Divide class into groups to do the speaking exercise and monitor, helping with language.

Extension: a Class Conference

This leads very nicely into work on presentations and a Class Conference role-play:

- Give the title of conference (e.g. if topic for the week is on food, the conference may be called: 'Worries About Food: You Are What You Eat')
- Ask class to brainstorm topics they'd expect to hear people discussing at the conference (e.g. BSE, school dinners, Atkins diet, food wastage, vitamin supplements)
- Give a sheet of paper to each student / pair who choose a different topic and write down one or two conventional wisdoms at the top of their sheet about their topic (e.g. British beef is not safe to eat.)
- Students now pass around their piece of paper and other pairs / individuals write one question about the topic they'd like to have answered. Encourage them to ask questions that might challenge received opinions.
- Once the original piece of paper gets back to the student / pair who chose the topic they should have a variety of questions to base their presentations around.
- Students can then be given an internet lesson, researching their questions on bbc.co.uk, wikipedia.org, guardianunlimited.com, google.co.uk
- Presentations prepared in class and delivered within a conference role-play setting the next day.