



Module 0

Introduction to democratic dialogue and communicating controversial issues at school

Developed by
Symplexis, Greece & Erasmushogeschool Brussel, Belgium



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DD@S: Democratic Dialogue at school
An online game-based training tool on Democratic Dialogue for Teachers
<https://ddasproject.eu>

Training course for school teams, teachers and
school leaders in Europe



This module offers you:

INTRODUCTION

Aim, Learning objectives & Learning Outcomes

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Key concepts, background information, relevant theories

ACTIVITIES

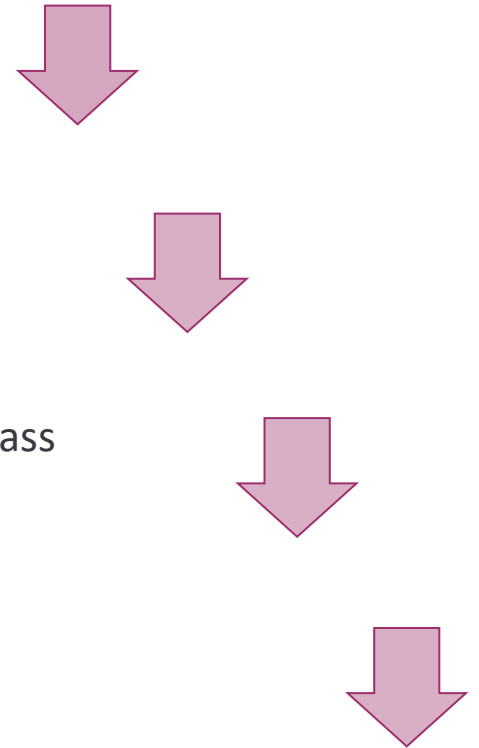
Exercises, self-reflection & practical resources to promote democratic dialogue and deal with controversial issues in class

USEFUL TIPS

Advice, ideas and proposals on relevant issues

USEFUL READING

References and further reading



INTRODUCTION

Key-words

1. Democratic dialogue
2. Controversial issues
3. Teachers' role
4. Teaching strategies



Aim & Learning Objectives

This module aims at introducing participants to democratic dialogue and controversial issues at school and to explore strategies for turning such issues into positive pedagogical opportunities.

Through this module, learners (*teachers, educators, school principles, staff and related stakeholders*) are expected to:

- Get familiar with an introductory theoretical framework around democratic dialogue and controversial issues
- Get acquainted to triggers of controversial issues at school
- Reflect upon their role in dealing with controversial issues in the class and with the causes and challenges related to such issues
- Acknowledge the value of engaging students in dialogue on controversial issues in class



Learning Outcomes

As a result of participating in this module, learners (*teachers, educators, school principles, staff and related stakeholders*) will be able to:

- Define basic terms and concepts related to democratic dialogue and controversial issues at school
- Prepare a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class (general guidance)
- Implement teaching strategies and techniques that promote open and respectful dialogue, turning their classroom into a “safe space” for the exploration of controversial issues



MODULE'S 0 STRUCTURE

Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions

It all starts with communication

But what about miscommunication?

What is dialogue?

Why is dialogue important in the school setting?

What are controversial issues?

Why should we teach/discuss controversial issues in the classroom?

Unit 0.2: Facing the challenges of teaching controversial issues

What are the main challenges of discussing controversial issues in class?

a) The wider school context

b) The role of teachers & teaching styles

c) Student's sensitivities, classroom climate & control

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

a) Safety goes first: setting ground rules

b) Decide carefully about your topic

c) Set realistic goals

d) Do your homework (and students theirs!)

e) Develop empathy

f) Explore how the students respond to the issue & "meta-talk"

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND



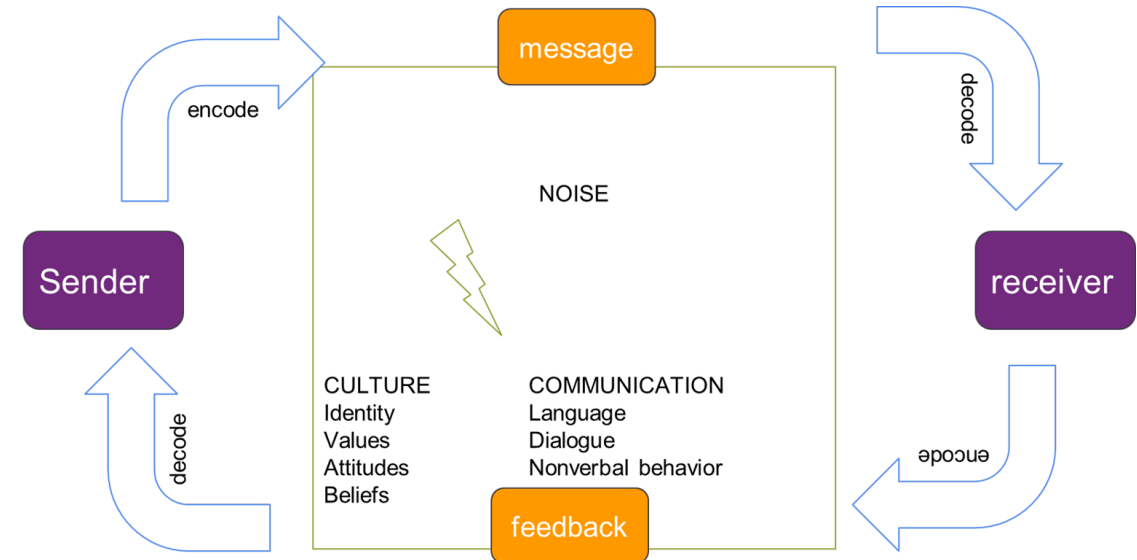
Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions

It all starts with communication

Communication is the **“glue”** that holds people, teams, organisations and whole societies together. At the heart of human communication is the question of **how we create meaning**.

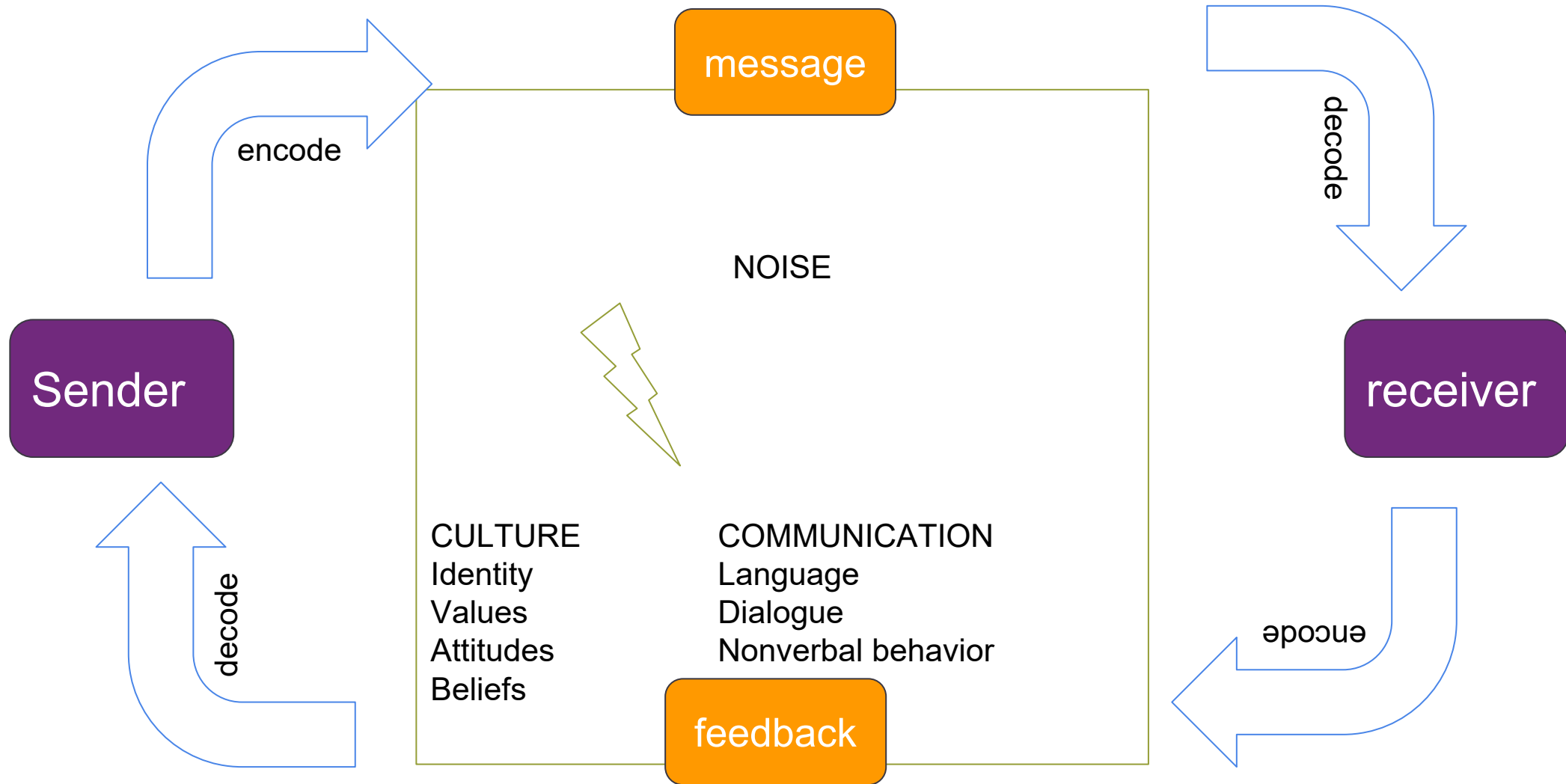
Communication is **more than simply the transmission or exchanging of information** by speaking, writing, or using some other medium. The term requires an element of success in transmitting or imparting a message, whether information, ideas or emotions.

In **face-to-face communication** the roles of the sender and recipient are not distinct but usually pass back and forwards between the participants. When we listen, we pay attention not only to the words spoken, but also to the other person's tone of voice, facial expressions, posture, and emotions.



In **classrooms** all parties communicate with each other, even if in very subtle ways such as through eye-contact (or lack of) and general body language. **Successful teaching** is generally considered a combination of **50% knowledge and 50% communication skills**.

Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions



Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions

But what about miscommunication?

There are many factors that can influence how a message is transmitted from the sender (teacher) to the recipients (students), such as:

- our feelings,
- the surrounding context,
- the communication style or medium or even
- our geographic location.

Noise can be defined as any interference that disrupts and/or distorts communication.

Noise based on socio cultural beliefs and norms has several challenges because of the absence of relatedness.



How miscommunication happens (and how to avoid it) - Katherine Hampsten, TED-ed, 2016 (subtitles in multiple languages).

View full lesson (EN) [here](#).

Matching Activity



Match the most common types of noise/barriers in communication with their correct examples

- 1) Physical/external**
- 2) Physiological & Psychological/internal**
- 3) Semantic and linguistic – related to the meaning of words, grammar, dialect etc.**
- 4) Cultural – including ethnocentrism, prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination**

- a) A student who is unfamiliar with a specific terminology may be unable to understand what the teacher is saying.
- b) A honking car or annoying classroom sidebar conversations
- c) A student is hungry or has a health condition that prevents him/her to concentrate in class or is simply daydreaming
- d) A Greek male student at the University of Malaysia extends a handshake to a Malaysian female classmate, but she declines and he feels insulted because he doesn't know yet that in Malaysia women do not like to handshake men, which is a social norm.

CORRECT ANSWERS: 1-b, 2-c, 3-a, 4-d

Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions

What is dialogue?

It is a **meaningful two-way conversation**, a fruitful exchange of words and perspectives between **two or more participants**, a communication form for **discovering and co-creating a new level of shared meaning** among and through a group of people.

The dialogue process asks participants to **leave their argumentative mindsets** at the door, to remove their attachments to a particular point of view or opinion, to “suspend” their current feelings, assumptions, beliefs, and meaning in order to be **open to the feelings, assumptions, beliefs, opinions and meanings of others**.

Through the exploration of our differences and commonalities, dialogue can make us see the world in new eyes, helps develop and understand multiple perspectives, and **makes people think –together– of new possibilities that no person in the group would have been capable of thinking before, alone**.

Democracy, as a form of government and political philosophy, is based on the principle and practice of solving differences first and foremost through dialogue, that provides citizens with the opportunity to voice their concerns, needs and interests.

“Fill the blanks” Activity



Fill the blanks with the correct words

The term (1)..... comes from the Greek word (2), where *dia* means “through” and *logos* is “word”. (3), discussion and dialogue are often used interchangeably, however their intentions differ. The first two are (4), while dialogue is (5)and transformative.

The differences between debate, discussion and dialogue have been well articulated by [Nagda, R. et al., 2008](#) and [Flavin-McDonald, C. & McCoy, M.L., 1997](#).
Check the sources for more details!

a) Debate , b) Oppositional, c) Dialogue, d) «Διάλογος» (diálogos), e) Collaborative

CORRECT ANSWERS: 1-c, 2-d, 3-a, 4-b, 5-e

Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions

Why is dialogue important in the school setting?

The theory of dialogue emphasizes its power as **key factor in any change process** and as **central component to democracy and education for democracy**. Through the development of dialogue skills, schools fulfil their role as democratic institutions.

Placing dialogue at the heart of schools activates **responsible citizenship**, as students are motivated and empowered to get involved in issues that affect both their present and future.

However, by simply gathering people together in a room does not guarantee meaningful dialogue. What is required is a **set of structures, processes and skills** for stimulating and sustaining conversations where participants will build on each other’s best thinking and strive to achieve a degree of mutual understanding, and depending on the case, will offer solutions.

In education, it is important to create **safe spaces for dialogue** and fruitful conversations of all kinds and with **all kinds of stakeholders**: teachers with their peers, students with their peers, teachers and students together, administrators and teachers, administrators and students, administrators, school boards and parents, teachers with parents and the larger community, students with the larger community, and so forth.

First-order goals	Exploration & Issue learning
	Improved democratic attitudes
	Language development & communication skills
	Improved relationships
Second-order goals	Transformed conflicts
	Individual & collective action
	Improved institutional decision making
Third-order goals	Improved community problem solving
	Increased civic capacity

Goals of dialogue and deliberation

Adapted from graphic available at:
Building Public Understanding for Student-Centered Learning:
A Toolkit for Change Agents
<https://buildingpublicunderstanding.org/deep-dialogue>

Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions

What are controversial issues?

If “issues” are concerns or topics that require attention, discussion or resolution, then “controversial issues” are -more or less- “sensitive topics” that **evoke strong feelings & views** and **divide opinion** not only among participants in a discussion but in communities and the wider society in general.

Controversial issues are related to “**open questions**” -not “settled” ones- that are significant for the general public, affecting the **sociopolitical, cultural, economic or environmental context** in which people live. The decision to frame an issue as open or settled, needs to be thoughtful and based on available facts.

Most of controversial issues concern questions of **value, ethics and beliefs** and are usually **complicated**, with no “clear” and “easy” answers. They are issues on which people often hold strong views based on their own experiences, interests, values and personal context, that is why it is important to be explored under different perspectives that have legitimate sources of information.

Controversial issues vary in **place** and **time** and can be from **local** to **global**, e.g. from mosque building in a neighborhood to reducing the impacts of climate change at international level. Some are **long-standing**, while others **very recent**. An issue that is controversial in one community or country may be widely accepted in another. Many topics can become controversial and **new controversies** appear every day, through public channels like news media, electoral politics, and social media -especially in the context of “fake news”.

Issues like immigration, terrorism, war, religion and extremism, race and racism, LGBTIQ+ rights & human rights in general, gender equality, sexism, climate change, politics, technology, health are big in the news in many countries.

Take a look in the list with “The Top 30 Controversial Topics” in American life created by [Academic Influence](#) and think which of these issues are considered as controversial in your own country as well and which aren’t.

Unit 0.1: Getting started with basic terms & key questions

Why should we teach/discuss controversial issues in the classroom?

Many teachers **hesitate or avoid** discussing controversial issues into their class, **under the fear that this could spark conflict** between students or result in reprimands from the school director or parents. Additionally, teachers might feel unconfident because of a lack of coping strategies to deal with controversy at school.

However, controversy is a growing part of life, and therefore of school life. And school is supposed, among others, to **prepare students for whatever lies ahead in life**, including having challenging discussions with people who might hold opinions that are different from our own.

Discussing sensitive, controversial issues and providing **age-appropriate learning opportunities** around these issues prepares students for democratic participation in later life and can make a positive contribution to young peoples' personal and emotional development. This means that teachers must be able to facilitate these types of discussions by creating and maintaining a **safe, respectful learning environment**.

“True or False” Activity



Which of the following statements are true and which are false?

1. *There are many benefits that come from embracing controversy in class.*

TRUE

FALSE

2. *Controversy enables students to identify and critically analyze their own values and those of others.*

TRUE

FALSE

3. *It is important to create opportunities for young people to learn to engage in dialogue with each other by focusing on issues on which they share similar viewpoints.*

TRUE

FALSE

By engaging with controversial issues, students develop important competences relating to democratic culture, civic attitudes and behaviours.

TRUE

FALSE

*The European Wergeland Centre/theewc.org,
“Teaching Controversial Issues”
(incl. 4 support videos for educators)*

“True or False” Activity



Correct answers & explanations

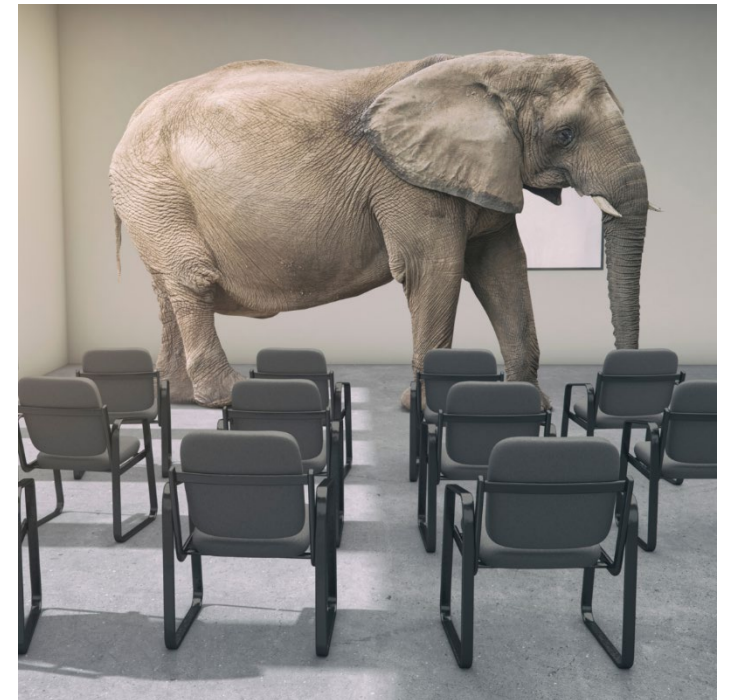
- 1 – TRUE (explanation: Yes, indeed! That is why we should take it seriously whenever it occurs in School life)
- 2 – FALSE (explanation: Controversy enables students to identify and critically analyze their own values and those of others)
- 3 – FALSE (explanation: The point is for young people to engage in a dialogue by focusing on issues on which they have different points of view!)
- 4 – TRUE (explanation: Yes, indeed! That is why we should discuss controversial issues in class)

Unit 0.2: Facing the challenges of teaching controversial issues

What are the main challenges of discussing controversial issues in class?

Following the Training Pack [“Living with Controversy - Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights”](#) (Council of Europe, 2015) and the guide [“Teaching Controversial Issues”](#) (Oxfam, 2018), the main challenges for teachers who wish to bring dialogue for controversial issues into their classes, come under the following broad headings:

- a) The wider school context
- b) The role of teachers & teaching styles
- c) Student’s sensitivities, classroom climate and control



*The elephant in the (class)room:
aren't we going to discuss it?!*

Unit 0.2: Facing the challenges of teaching controversial issues

a) The wider school context

The existence of a **whole school approach** and a **clear school policy** regarding the creation of safe dialogue spaces and discussing controversial issues provides support and confidence for teachers and the wider school community. A whole-school approach to discussing controversies needs to be **proactive, active and responsive**, and **school leaders and leadership teams** are suggested to take a range of actions when developing a strategy for handling controversy that, according to the [Sharing Knowledge and Handling Controversy Project \(SKHC\)](#), should include the following:



Since students bring into classroom their experiences, views, beliefs and values from their life at home and their local communities, it is also helpful for the school to develop **open relationships with parents** about the importance of children discussing “uncomfortable”/ “complex”/ controversial issues, always in **ways that are appropriate for their age**.

However the lack of such a policy and related whole school approach shouldn’t demotivate teachers to discuss controversial issues, since –sooner or later– such issues emerge during classes and the point is to handle them effectively so as to gradually lead to the development of a positive school culture of acceptance, understanding and inclusion. In any case, teachers can open the dialogue and propose the development of a school safeguarding policy; in the meantime they are encouraged to **seek for support**, whenever they need it, from **senior management, experienced colleagues/peers with relevant expertise** and **trustful national and European resources** on relevant issues.

Unit 0.2: Facing the challenges of teaching controversial issues

b) The role of teachers & teaching styles

Teachers' own thinking may occasionally be challenged by controversial topics, thus **there is nothing wrong with declaring openly in class that some issues are complex even for adults**, and that everyone needs to take their time and examine various perspectives before responding.

Teachers don't need to be “subject experts” or have all the answers to teach controversial issues well!

Teaching controversial issues means embracing the “fear of not having all the answers”, avoiding bias, seeking for balance and objectivity and combining approaches, depending on the students' profile, maturity and skills, cultural & social context, and other related factors, so as to create a safe space for a fruitful dialogue.

Teaching controversial issues also means a teacher should be able to perceive the differences between the own opinion and pupils' opinions and the underlying variables that are at play.

Matching Activity



Teachers' attitudes can make the discussion of controversial issues difficult, due to various obstacles. Match the most common types of obstacles with their explanation.

- 1. Denial**
- 2. Privilege**
- 3. Avoidance**
- 4. Academic viewpoints**

a) When a teacher attempts to persuade the students to adopt his/her own opinions as “right”.

b) When a teacher avoids discussion on a controversial subject because he/she is unable or unwilling to teach it.

c) When a teacher adopts an academic view on a subject that does not accurately reflect the actual circumstances.

d) When a teacher refuses to acknowledge a topic as controversial and does not modify his or her teaching approach in response; instead, the topic is taught as usual, with an emphasis on “right” and “wrong” answers.

CORRECT ANSWERS: 1-d, 2-a, 3-b, 4-c

Unit 0.2: Facing the challenges of teaching controversial issues

b) The role of teachers & teaching styles

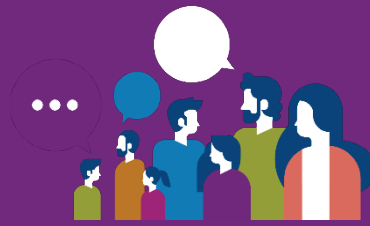
The Power of Saying "I Don't Know"

Once students ask a question that you, as a teacher, don't have an answer, try to use your "fear of not knowing" to your learners' advantage.

Try to say *"I don't know, but that's a great question! How can we find out?"* or *"Hmm, I'm not exactly sure (recognition), that's actually a really good question (expression), how would you begin trying to find out the answer? How can we find it together?"* (motivation).

Crockett, L. (2023). Why saying "I Don't Know" is often the best way to teach, Future Focused Learning

Matching Activity



Some possible approaches teachers may take in addressing controversial issues in class include the following ([“Living with Controversy – Council of Europe, 2015”](#)).

Match the most common roles/approaches that teachers adopt with their explanation.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Facilitator/Neutral/Impartial Chairperson | a) The teacher supports “marginalized”, “ignored” social groups. |
| 2. Balanced/Objective/Academic | b) The teacher present/explain a wide range of alternative views without stating his/her own position. |
| 3. Declared commitment | c) The teacher only facilitates the discussion, without expressing personal views, ensuring that all viewpoints are represented, through young people’s statements or published sources. |
| 4. The “devil’s advocate” | d) The teacher echoes the dominant views or takes the side of public authorities. |
| 5. Ally | e) The teacher openly express his/her position for young people to challenge, making it clear that this role could lead to biased discussion. |
| 6. Official line | f) The teacher intentionally takes the opposite position from the majority opinion, ensuring by this way that all views are covered and that existing beliefs are challenged. |

CORRECT ANSWERS: 1-c, 2-b, 3-e, 4-f, 5-a, 6-d

Unit 0.2: Facing the challenges of teaching controversial issues

c) Student's sensitivities, classroom climate and control

Teaching about controversial issues is related to the fear that a **discussion will “overheat”** and become out of control, undermining the authority and reputation of the teacher and harming relationships between students and/or teachers, especially if the expressed opinions and attitudes lead to some students –in particular from vulnerable groups– feeling offended, harassed or marginalized by other students and/or the teacher.

On the other hand there is the fear that a discussion will **“underheat”**, resulting in a wall of apathy among students.

To overcome this challenge, teachers should come up with **methods for preventing conflict in the classroom and dispelling apathy**. The literature emphasizes the critical importance of creating and maintaining a **“democratic classroom –and in general school – culture”**, namely a learning environment where students will feel free, safe and comfortable to express reasonable points of view which contradict those held either by their class teacher or by their peers. A positive and fruitful class climate is created when both teachers and students are honest and trusted, open and non-judgmental.

The key to fostering a **positive, supporting, safe learning environment** is frequently mentioned as **“ground rules”** for discussion.

This term refers to the establishment of **codes of conduct or classroom/school rules** for how students should behave in class, especially during a dialogue or when there is disagreement over an issue.

In fact, it is frequently argued that these rules are most effective when **students themselves are actively involved** in their development, they are prominently displayed for everyone to see and are treated as “work-in-progress” that should be revisited and revised from time to time.

Check this module's 1st activity and create with your students your “class contract”!

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

This section examines briefly how a teacher can start a conversation in class or plan how to teach around a controversial topic. The proposed important features or “building blocks” do not necessarily need to be in that order:

- a) Safety goes first: setting ground rules
- b) Decide carefully about your topic
- c) Set realistic goals
- d) Do your homework (and students theirs!)
- e) Developing Empathy
- f) Exploring how the students respond to the issue & “meta-talk”

Useful sources:

Emerson, L., Gannon, M., Harrison, C., Lewis, V., Poynor, A.M. (2012). Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom. A Resource for Citizenship Education. Ireland: CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, Professional Development Service for Teachers, and Authors

Oxfam (2018). Teaching Controversial Issues: A guide for teachers. Oxfam Education.

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

a) Safety goes first: setting ground rules

Simply stating in your class “What do you think about...(a controversial topic)” is most of the times a successful recipe for disaster!

When thinking about teaching of controversial issues, “**safety goes first**”:

- Students should be allowed and encouraged to explore various perspectives on an certain issue, without feeling exposed because of their views or marginalized because of the views of other students
- Teachers should feel confident and empowered to cover a topic, including its controversy, without being under pressure or feeling that this will put them in a difficult or dangerous position.

How are we supposed to achieve that?

Bringing in the classroom some rules that “already exist out there” doesn’t always work. The key for the teachers is to **co-create with students a safe environment** by **discussing and agreeing all together** on basic written **guidelines, directions and procedures** that will help all participants to express themselves with respect and consideration even if they have a different opinion from the others.

Consider for a moment your classroom as a whole: arrangement, decor, media and instruction. How do these aspects of your teaching allow everyone to participate and feel inspired and welcome? What can you do to improve it? How can you do your class more inclusive?

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

b) Decide carefully about your topic

Read the following two sentences and think about their difference:

- “Which issues/topics **should be treated as** controversial in the class?”
- “Which issues/topics **are justifiably** controversial?”

It is not always that obvious but “should be treated as” implies that there is a judgment to make. The way that we frame the questions, in general, has a huge impact on the way that we will look for answers, also defining what answers we might get.

What is considered as “controversial” is constantly changing, especially in the context of the “fake news” narrative. Deciding, as a teacher, what to treat as controversial in the classroom is crucial, since you should avoid treating settled issues as open and open questions as settled. All controversial issues contain evidence that needs to be carefully considered.

(...) teachers who treat the settled empirical question as open are miseducating students. While it is fair to say to students, “There are many in the public who question whether climate change is a real concern,” it is not accurate to suggest that the scientific community is in doubt. We are also critical of teachers who treat the policy question as settled. What to do about climate change should be open for discussion.

We have identified some of the professional judgments that teachers need to make when deciding how to approach a controversial issue. First, they need to identify public policy questions (issues) that will unearth disagreement among the students. Next, they need to critically examine the issue to determine whether there are multiple perspectives that align with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to the course and democratic participation. Finally, thinking about which aspects of the question are open to interpretation and which ought to be treated as settled will help the teacher frame the question and prepare students for the discussion.

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

c) Set realistic goals

Before teaching or discussing a specific issue that may be controversial for your students, it is helpful to be very clear and realistic about what your goal is in raising or responding to the issue. Changing your students attitude is a noble, but not always a realistic expectation.

Depending on the issue, some realistic goals may include:

- to help students view the topic from a multiple point of view;
- To encourage students to look for reliable sources and seek different perspectives;
- to engage them in critical thinking and analysis (e.g. of official policies);
- to show students how misinformation is constructed and help them get better at detecting it; **or simply**
- to raise awareness. In fact, as Emerson et al. (2012, [p.21](#)), point out “a much safer place to start is by raising awareness about issues at a societal rather than individual level” which, in turn, might also challenge the actions of students and affect their attitudes, as well.
- To help students to distinguish the difference between facts and opinions and help them embrace opinions of others (Arzu & claeys, 2016)

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

d) Do your homework (and students theirs!)

- Say literally that you know the topic is controversial and that we should all respect other people's opinion and ask your class what they already know about the topic that you will discuss the next day/week etc.
- Take time to ask what pre-conceived ideas and information your students already have and will also make your students feel that they have a voice in the conversation.
- Identify/think of what information might be difficult for your class to understand and prepare yourself to explain those parts. Think of short stories or analogies to explain the controversial topic and avoid any unnecessary jargon or technical terminology ([Svahn, 2017](#)).
- Present key facts and figures on the topic: you can use videos, websites, official statistics and especially newspaper items ([Emerson et al., 2012, p.51](#)). You can also ask from students to search for supporting facts, information and visuals on the subject or even prepare short presentations.

Ensure that all students are aware that even so called “facts” can be challenged. Spend some time exploring this with your class, helping students to check for bias and encouraging them to question the information they are given. A useful strategy for presenting facts/figures is “Each One Teach One” ([Emerson et al., 2012, p.77](#)).

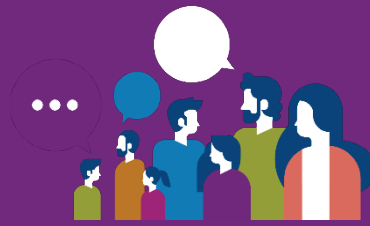
Be always careful: *“To invite students to develop opinions based on inaccuracies or misrepresentation of evidence undermines the very purpose of democratic education, which is to prepare young people for informed participation”* ([McAvoy & Ho, 2020a, p.30](#)).

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

e) Develop empathy

- Practicing empathy is one of the most important skills a teacher can have. Work to build mutual trust with your students and help them to understand and respect other people's feelings.
- Encourage students to place themselves into the situations others might find themselves in, and to explore a topic from someone else's point of view.
- A range of strategies can be used to achieve this, such as “role playing” in class (Emerson et al., 2012, p.56).
- Another useful idea is to invite a speaker in your class or organise a visit to an organisation or other relevant place where students will be able to listen personal stories, discuss and experience in first hand the topic taught.

“Flip cards” Activity



Flip on each card so as to learn more about the “Six Strategies for building empathy in the classroom” according to [Benner, D. \(2021\), Technotes, Oct. 7.](#)

1. Listen actively.

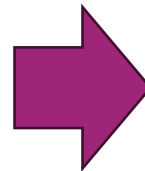
2. Withhold judgment.

3. Put yourself in your students' shoes

4. Ask open-ended questions.

5. Be mindfully aware of your student's behaviors.

6. Show empathic body language.



1. Express genuine interest in what your students are saying.

2. Set aside your own reaction and focus on listening to your students.

3. Try to understand your student's feelings

4. Such questions start with “Why?”, “How?” and “What?”, encouraging a full answer, rather than a simple “yes” or “no.”

5. Learn to notice what's happening in the present moment, without judgement. Start by being aware of your own mind, body or surroundings.

6. Is your posture “open”? Are your eyes focused on your students? Are you speaking in a positive tone?

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

f) Explore how the students respond to the issue & “meta-talk”

- Having explored the controversial topic in some detail it is important to give to your students the opportunity to think about how to respond to the issue without feeling threatened or exposed.
- A “Social Responsibility Framework” is a useful way of dealing with this aspect of the topic: “what can **individuals, society and government** do about the X controversial issue?” Remember at this stage to frame the topic and related questions from a structural rather than a private/personal point of view (Emerson et al., 2012, p.30).
- The “Thinking Through Challenges method” (Emerson et al., 2012, p.54) is a useful scenario based tool for helping students to think about their own responses to an issue, considering the consequences of various choices.
- Teachers can go one step further by ending a discussion of a controversial issue with the questions, “How do you think we did well in this discussion? What should we work on for next time?” As McAvoy & Ho (2020b) underline *“this ‘meta talk’ about the discussion helps students think about what a good discussion looks like and how they can improve their own participation”*.

Unit 0.3: How to organize a lesson or start a discussion around a controversial topic in class

f) Explore how the students respond to the issue & “meta-talk”

Re-Framing Questions to Reflect a Structural Focus

The following questions are framed under an individual (private) focus:

- *How do you feel about the increase in the number of people from other ethnic groups in society?*
- *Would you be friends with someone from another ethnic community?*
- *How would you respond if someone told a racist joke?*

The same questions are re-framed under a structural (public) focus, taking some of the “heat” out of the issue:

- *How has society responded to the increase in the number of people from minority ethnic communities in our country?*
- *What could the government do to tackle racism?*
- *How might an individual respond if someone told a racist joke?*

ACTIVITIES



1. Team building activity :“The blooming flower of good communication”

Please check the activity doc.

Module 0 - Activity 1

The blooming flower of good communication

Team building activity for teachers/adult learners

2. Scenario-based activity (for teachers): “Dealing with quarrels in our school”

Please check the activity doc

Module 0 – Activity 2

“Dealing with quarrels in our school”

A scenario-based activity helping teachers to identify ways to handle conflicts at school

3. Scenario-based activity (for students): “In other people’s shoes”

Please check the activity doc

Module 0 – Activity 3

“In other people’s shoes”

A scenario based activity focusing on everyday situations that can help students understand and implement basic principles related to dialogue and problem solving

TIPS



Useful tips

Dealing with challenging classroom situations

Situation	Issues to consider	Proposed helpful strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student makes provocative or insulting remarks during discussion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have ground rules/a class contract?• How can you continue to give the argumentative student a voice while preventing them from promoting their negativity or abusing other students?• Is the student obviously out of control or off balance?• Does the class discussion get too heated and unpleasant?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you teach a course that has any potential for the discussion of strongly held opinions, discuss this potential in the first week of class and what stance you want to take on it .(E.g. “The question of the validity of evolution as a theory is outside the scope of our discussion in this course. The course is based on the premise that evolution is true and you will need to explain course content accordingly whether you personally believe in evolution or not.”)• If you do have ground rules, it’s time to refer to it and ask students to respect them. If no, maybe it is a good opportunity to discuss the necessity of co-creating ground rules with your class.• Look for a way to pull back from the emotion of the comment. (E.g. “This is a very emotional issue for many people. But let’s try to phrase things as objectively as possible. Are you wanting to make the point that...?” Or “It’s true some people feel this way, but many others don’t. Let’s step back and look at the history and the reasons why there is disagreement.”)• If the student seems truly out of control, propose him to go outside for a while and return later.

Useful tips

Dealing with challenging classroom situations

Situation	Issues to consider	Proposed helpful strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One student dominates the discussion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can you encourage this student to modify his/her attitude without discouraging the rest of the students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk to the student privately and thank him/her for their contributions to the class. Tell him/her you would like others to also contribute so you would like this student to hold off for a little. Possible suggestions for this student could be to: Wait until you call on him/her; after speaking once, wait until at least two or three other people have spoken before speaking again.• Ask questions to certain areas of the class, "Can someone from the front/middle/back row tell me..."

Useful tips

Dealing with challenging classroom situations

Situation	Issues to consider	Proposed helpful strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disruptive behavior: Students whispering/talking in class or playing with their cell phones or students coming in late.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How disruptive is the behavior?• Is it bothering you?• Is it annoying to other students?• How frequent and prolonged is the behavior?• What are the underlying causes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on the underlying causes. Are students talking because they have questions, you're not making time to answer? Is there enough challenge and variety in your course to keep students interested? Are students late in other classes? Do they behave similarly with other teachers?• Include cell-phones policies in your "classroom's contract" – set some ground rules with all and for all.• If students are talking, pause and stay silent until they stop.• Ask talking students if they have any question.• If students talk habitually in class or are often late (e.g. after the break), talk to them individually about it.• Encourage class participation and develop activities that will keep students engaged in an enjoyable way.

Useful Reading



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DD@S: Democratic Dialogue at school
An online game-based training tool on
Democratic Dialogue for Teachers

<https://ddasproject.eu>

Training course for school teams,
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