



Module 1

Discussing political issues

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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

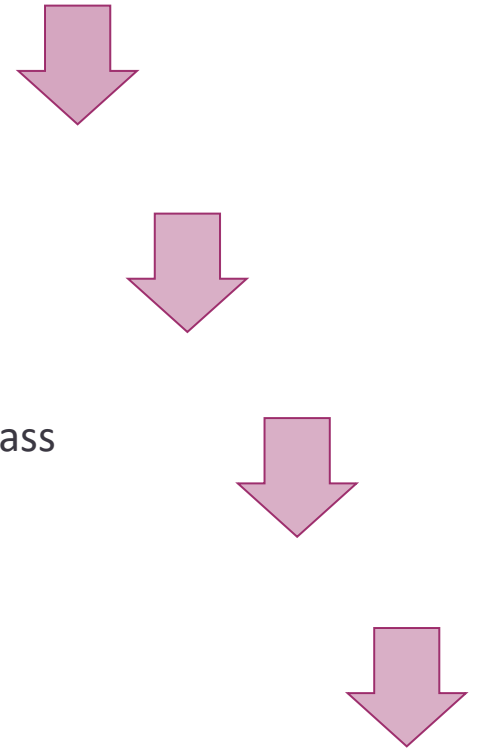
Exercises, self-reflection & practical resources to promote democratic dialogue and deal with controversial issues in class

USEFUL TIPS

Advice, ideas and proposals on relevant issues

USEFUL READING

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INTRODUCTION

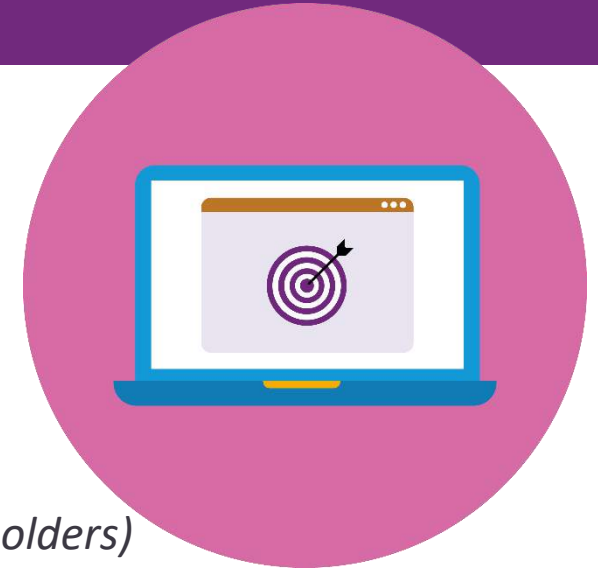
Key-words

1. Political challenges
2. Democratic Dialogue (DD) as a method
3. Dialogue models
4. Cultural awareness



Aim & Learning Objectives

This module aims at introducing the *Democratic Dialogue method* to improve *communication skills* when dealing with controversial topics in a classroom. The module encourages a *constructive dialogue* based on mutual understanding in order to counteract negative perceptions and polarisation and transform controversial discussions into an enriching learning experience to promote *civic participation*.



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

1. Gain insight in *political controversial topics* and *youth democratic participation*
1. Learn the principles of the *Democratic Dialogue method*
1. Improve their professional *dialogue skills* based on three communication models
1. Develop an *attitude of cultural awareness*

Learning Outcomes

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

- Know more about **mechanisms that trigger the occurrence of political controversial topics and youth democratic participation**
- **Use the Democratic Dialogue (DD) method** when dealing with a controversial topic
- **Integrate dialogue techniques** in the practice in order to deal constructively with controversial issues
- Encourage a **constructive dialogue** and transform sensitive discussions into an **enriching learning experience**
- Act from from an **attitude of cultural awareness**



THEORETICAL BACKGROUND



“Within the ‘we’ that constitutes the **political community**, the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is legitimate. His ideas will be fought with vigour but his right to defend them will never be questioned. The category of enemy does not disappear, however, for it remains pertinent with regard to those who, by questioning the very principles of pluralist democracy, cannot form part of the agonistic space. With the distinction between antagonism (friend/enemy relation) and agonism (relation between adversaries) in place, we are better able to understand why the agonistic confrontation, far from representing a danger for democracy, is in reality the very condition of its existence.”

- Chantal Mouffe -

<http://pavilionmagazine.org/chantal-mouffe-agonistic-democracy-and-radical-politics/>

Unit 1: Political challenges entering classrooms

Context

Democracy without dialogue is unthinkable, but finding a way to talk about disagreements in an open and respectful atmosphere isn't easy. **Varying opinions and perspectives** about a complex and mixed society can be **enriching** but are not always considered as advantageous by all concerned. It is not always straightforward to start a **constructive dialogue** when radical (or extreme) comments arise or to moderate discussions about **controversial political issues**, that originate in a personal set of beliefs.

For teachers, it can be **tempting to avoid** controversial topics in the classroom for several reasons. But teaching students to discuss hot topics rationally is very important. There are **various political topics** that can keep youth busy and cause controversy in the classroom.

civics topics:

- human rights
- voting
- drinking minimum age
- legalizing drugs
- abortion
- school drop-out
- drugs
- etc.

social justice topics:

- immigration
- racism
- criminality
- role of media
- climate change
- etc.

A recent study of the European Commission (2023) indicates that **the voter turnout** – one of the most important forms of political participation – has been **declining** since the 1950s, posing a major challenge to democracies around the world. Various studies consistently show alarmingly low voter turnout among young people at different levels and in different regions and countries (Deželan 2023). The **voter abstention** in EU Member States, especially among the youngest cohorts of eligible voters, is **particularly high** (over 70 per cent). Moreover, the gap between young and older voters has widened significantly across the democratic world, pointing to a problem with low political participation among young people not only in elections but also in institutional politics. In several European countries the indicators for **democratic participation** score quite **low**. **Young people today participate less in institutional politics** than other age groups (Kavadias, e.a., 2022).

Not participating does not necessarily mean that the youth have no knowledge of politics. Or, they are not interested in politics. For example, it appears that students (especially with a migration background) generally display a broader **(geo)political horizon**. They are usually well aware of international political events, which they pick up on through various (social) media, and which they also introduce in their class discussions (Kavadias, e.a., 2022).

Contrary to previous, other researchers claim that young people do **value democracy and its underlying values**. Young people prefer democratic governance of their country to undemocratic forms of government and consider a fair electoral process important. They value equal political rights and consider it essential that freedom of expression applies to everyone. Also, young people find it also important that there are discussions between people who strongly disagree on political subjects. It is therefore very important for teachers to get started with these information in an accurate way.

Challenges for teachers

The education system in today's society is being confronted with **new challenges** due to a new **complex context**. Teachers and students come from increasingly **divergent** socio-economic and cultural **backgrounds** and the **impact** of this evolution has a direct influence in the **classroom**. Because of an increasing diverse social context, a person's maternal framework of standards and values is not the socially shared framework anymore. A growing number of persons feel excluded and misunderstood which leads to **disinterest in civic participation**.

An important **goal** of teachers and in general the educational system, is **to empower school-going youth to act as thoughtful and engaged** European citizens. To achieve this goal, there are some approaches that can be implemented in daily classroom practice.

Unit 1.1: School approach

School as a training place for democracy

There is now a considerable amount of research that shows that education can play a role in stimulating citizenship development of students (Nieuwelink, 2020). Interactive lessons - and workshops- about democracy are important in citizenship education. In particular, setting up the school as a training ground for acquiring democratic insights, attitudes and behavior is related to the willingness to actually engage the students in democratic participation. Previous researches also show that exercise in democracy at school is not limited to one subject and can be implemented in the whole curriculum. After all, there is a need for a **general culture of citizenship**. It is essential that relationships ensure that students feel **safe, connected and free to engage** in democratic interactions (Kavadias, e.a., 2022).

Unit 1.2: How to deal with democratic citizenship at school

Ways to implement democratic citizenship

Discussing political controversies in the classroom can be done using **various tools**. The sense of citizenship can be learnt at school through **interactive lessons, workshops, exercises, images and games on democracy and citizenship**.

Schools that work on active citizenship do so in the way that best suits their vision of education, their student population, the school context and the degree of teacher and pupil participation. According to the vision of the public school network education of the Flemish Community (in short: GO!), **citizenship education** at school means that students:

- Gain **insight** into important **fundamentals** of a **democracy**;
- Form their own **opinion**;
- Learning to **dialogue** with each other;
- Think **critically** about their role/position in their own environment and in society and **investigate** this in depth;
- Learn by **doing** what it means to be an active citizen;
- **Participate** in the school as a mini-society of democratic culture;
- Find **role models** in their teachers and other staff members who themselves encourage and contribute to democratic action and participation and critical inquiry.

Unit 1.3: good practice: 'Democratic Dialogue (DD)'

Democratic values cannot exist without strong communication skills. The education field is a place where they can be developed within a society.

Teachers will have to respond constructively to the new challenges with students of diverse backgrounds. The classroom is the place where all these views and opinions come together. The basic principles of '**Democratic Dialogue (DD)**' is a constructive dialogue based on mutual comprehension to counteract negative perceptions and polarization. Open and constructive dialogues can also transform sensitive discussions into an enriching learning experience.

A democratic dialogue is a **constructive** and **investigative** dialogue. By means of this dialogue, it aims to promote an **empathic attitude** amongst every professional, which can lead to encounters that highlight **common ground** whilst maintaining **respect** for differences. As we have seen in the previous module, an important initial step in dialogue is the creation of a **safe environment** where trust between persons is the key. Everyone should feel **free to express their opinion** without fear of the consequences. Each opinion deserves **recognition**.

The democratic dialogue sparks **curiosity** about that which is different in a respectful way. If we show genuine interest in others in a respectful way, we can expect people to relate more easily and empathically to one another, permitting a real dialogue. There are no winners or losers in a democratic dialogue. The goal is **to build bridges, share points of view** and discover **new ways** of building a brighter future. Democratic dialogue is not a "one size fits all" strategy. It is not an unequivocal method that applies to all situations. It is a method that is flexible and adaptable.

2. Democratic Dialogue (DD) as a method

In 2015, a Belgian multidisciplinary team has developed the 'Democratic Dialogue', a method that facilitates mutual understanding and supports teachers in dealing with sensitive topics in their daily class practice.

The dialogue in this method is seen as an **inclusive process** where different opinions are heard and where responsibility is shared. The teacher's role is more like a moderator, who can recognize the different sensitivities/dispositions within the group and start up a constructive dialogue regarding these. The Democratic Dialogue promotes multilateral communication and mutual learning. It requires a degree of self-reflection / introspection, an open and inquisitive mind and a readiness for personal change. The purpose of asking questions is not limited to achieving one's personal goals but also to gaining a better understanding of what others think, which also results in a better self-understanding. The participants are prepared to discuss the root cause of a crisis and not just the visible signs. This method advocates a humane approach by showing respect, openness of mind and empathy / tolerance for differing and concurring points of view and by being open to change. Social interaction is made transparent and participants speak open heartedly, thus avoiding hidden agendas. The common goal is to learn to find a durable solution to a crisis situation or other conflict. The Democratic Dialogue has a long-term objective: it requires time and patience to find a solution that is satisfactory for all concerned when dealing with the root cause of a conflict that is often complex in nature.

Tips for a democratic dialogue

The following **tips** can help in creating a peaceful environment for a constructive dialogue:

- The participants sit in a **circle** such that everyone can hear and see one another.
- The debate is held in a **quiet area** with minimal distractions.
- A session should **not be too long**, as thinking is not a punishment.
- The group is comprised of **maximum 15 or 20 participants**.
- **No one is obliged** to participate actively

Teacher as a moderator

An important role is foreseen for the teacher (seen as a **moderator**) when guiding dialogues.

The **main democratic dialogue skills** are mentioned below:

- To recognize sensitive topics and to create a safe environment where they can be addressed and discussed.
- To use the knowledge and expectations of the participants as a starting point.
- To listen actively and without prejudice.
- To ask supplementary questions and listen to the answers to understand what the other person is really trying to say / the underlying reasoning.
- To recognize the difference between facts and opinions.
- To differentiate between the person and his / her opinions.
- To be able to treat different opinions respectfully.
- To examine all points of view critically, including one's own. To ask supplementary questions regarding the underlying reasoning rather than being judgmental.
- To go beyond a person's cultural background.
- To highlight generalizations and put them to question
- To consider someone's actions and expressions, not just his or her statements

3. Dialogue models

Democratic dialogue includes important elements based on different methods and approaches. In this section, we will focus on 3 important methods

3.1 Questioning without judging: **Socratic dialogue**

3.2 Insight in your own set of values and the impact on the other: **Intercultural communication**

3.3 How to stay human and respectful in difficult circumstances: **Non- violent communication**

3.1 Socratic dialogue

Introduction

Socratic dialogue is a very ancient teaching style developed by Socrates. Socrates taught students by asking question after question. He tried to expose contradictions in the students' thoughts and ideas to then guide them to solid, tenable conclusions.

Socrates thought that people learned best, not by being told what to believe or do, but by being guided through questioning to what made most sense to believe or do. His approach learns how to deal with complexities, confusion, perplexities and uncertainties.

Purpose

Socratic questioning is disciplined questioning that:

- *explores complex ideas*
- *gets to the heart of things*
- *opens up issues and problems*
- *uncovers assumptions*
- *analyses concepts*
- *distinguishes what we know from what we don't know*

The main principles of Socratic dialogue

- Every person must hear and see each other.
- Community of inquiry: every person is equal. Everything is worth investigating.
- The facilitator listens actively and asks open questions.
- The facilitator takes the Socratic stance: don't judge but ask a question.
- A Socratic dialogue always starts with an open, general question which opens up different perspectives. This question invites people to think.

Examples of Socratic starting questions:

‘What is justice?’ or ‘What does it mean to be good?’.



Ask open-ended questions

Socratic dialogue teaches us that you only really grasps what another person means by asking supplementary open questions.

Open questions enable better mutual comprehension and are the opposite of a judgmental attitude.

Open-ended questioning also provides the necessary emotional neutrality to bring depth into the dialogue process.

Examples:

‘What do you mean by ...?’

‘Can you explain why you think that?’

‘Is another explanation possible?’

‘why do you think so?’

‘Can you give an example?’

‘What is the real question involved?’

“True or False” Activity



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

1. Socrates responded to questions with questions

TRUE

FALSE

2. During a group discussion, you should interrupt if you have a very important point to make

TRUE

FALSE

3. The Socratic dialogue is effective in education

TRUE

FALSE

4. The teacher's role is to observe and monitor but rarely to participate

TRUE

FALSE

“True or False” Activity



Correct answers & explanations

1 – TRUE.

Explanation: Socrates wanted to get the other to answer his/her own question by making him/her think and drawing the answer out of him/her. Therefore, he never gave a clear answer but asked open questions to questions.

2 – FALSE

Explanation: Not only during this method, but in any dialogue you don't interrupt and listen patiently to the other

3 – TRUE

Explanation: The Socratic method of teaching helps students gain a better understanding of a topic, including the complexities behind it. Students get more insight, are involved in the learning process and develop critical thinking skills.

4 – TRUE

Explanation: The teacher asks questions to engage students in critical thinking, encouraging them to come to their own conclusions and solutions.

3.2 Intercultural communication

Introduction

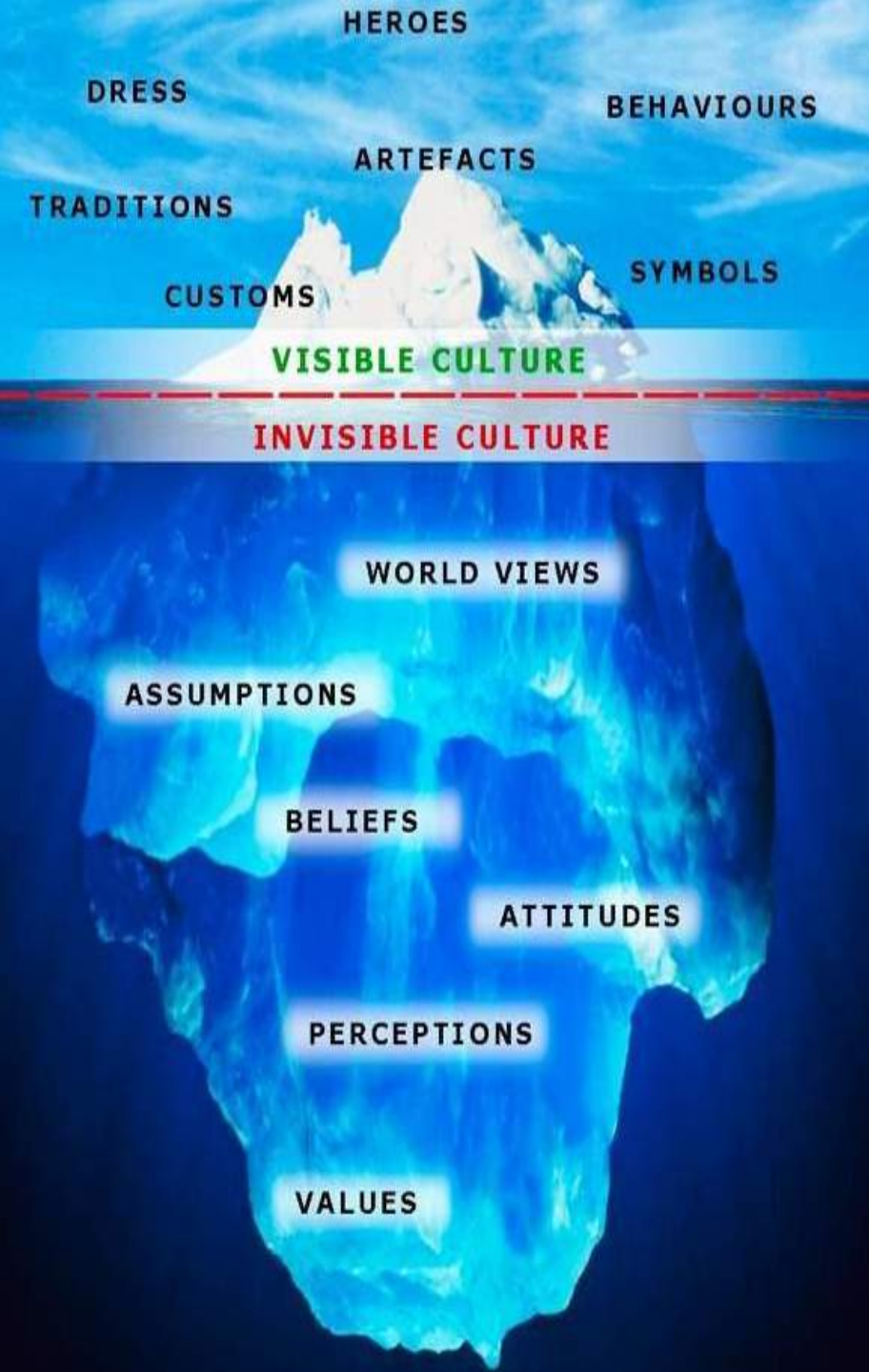
It is important to gain insight into the potential impact of cultural differences on social interactions. **Intercultural communication** literally means the communication between people of different cultural backgrounds.

Intercultural communication is the collaboration between individual/teams with **different cultural backgrounds**. It is not only important to master another language, but also to understand **different norms, values and codes of conduct**.

Each person has an internal **set of values** based on his/her own life experiences, that influences how he/she communicates with others. How we consider people depends on **what or how** we think, **our observations** and what we have **learned** and **experienced** in our lives. These important elements form our **interpretations** of other people and the world in general.

However, these interpretations do **not** always match with the **facts**. For this reason, we need to **open up** and need to have a dialogue with others. It is important to always adapt one's **perception of reality** so we don't get stuck in our own interpretations.

The intercultural communication method teaches us the importance of understanding one's own set of values and how to be open to other sets of values.



The iceberg metaphor

The main idea behind an iceberg as metaphor is that the greater part of the iceberg is hidden under the water so the part that you see is much smaller than the part that you don't see. If applied to a situation, the idea would be that **what you see or know about it is only a fraction of what can be seen or known**. The same could be said of an individual.

*Sets of values vary from person to person. **One should not limit oneself to one aspect for e.g. only culture or convictions.** You only get to know someone else by understanding their values and by being conscious of one's own.*

Exercise 1



Drag the statement you have already made or the situation you have already imagined to 'Yes'.

Drag the others to 'No'.

"Don't act like a girl"

"Wow, that is so gay!"

"Would she have chosen the headscarf herself?"

"Woman who have children are not so ambitious anymore"

"Hipsters are left-wing (voters)"

"Whoever votes on the right is a racist"

"People with a typically non-Western name are not highly educated"

"She openly sympathises with that party, she must be a Muslim / Christian / Orthodox ..."

yes

no

Explanation

Thanks for your honesty!

You make 100 quick decisions every day. You make this based on a 'first impression': skin color, clothes, tattoos, age, ... It is your unconscious biases that guide you when making this 'first impression'.

We all have **prejudices**. They stem from **stereotypes**. These are schemas in your head that make reality simpler. Prejudice is normal, but not being aware of your prejudices isn't okay. Prejudices influence your decisions and behavior.

But fortunately, you can do something about it!

Let's try another exercise!

Exercise 2: Stereotype or prejudice?



Do you know the difference between a stereotype and a prejudice? Drag the attributes to the correct definition.

A belief about a particular group

Stereotype

A belief about one person

Can lead to discrimination and racism.

Makes the world and fast decisions easier.

Prejudice

Explanation

Stereotypes and prejudices are peculiar to the human brain. To make the complex world simpler and understandable, our brain builds categories and schemas: these are also called **stereotypes**.

From the moment you judge about one person based on his or her characteristics, you speak of **prejudices**.

These two biases are constantly influencing your thoughts and behaviour. You can hurt or harm people and discriminate them unawaresly.

The good news is that you can work on your own prejudices by being aware of them!

The two previous methods (Socratic dialogue and intercultural communication) are effective tools to reflect upon our own prejudices.

3.3 Non-violent communication

Introduction

NonViolent Communication (NVC), developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s, is an awareness-based approach to communication based on **clarity, authenticity, strength and compassion**. It helps communicate better with other people, and reduce communication problems. NVC contributes to **self-awareness**, restore dialogue, listen subtly to oneself and others, decode unspoken messages, speak authentically and increases our chances of being heard. This model helps you resolve your deepest conflicts within yourself and with others through the power of **empathy**.

‘behind every action, there is a need’

BASICS OF NVC

1. OBSERVATIONS



What I observe (see,hear,remember)?
Free from evaluation, say what eye
of the camera could have caught.
"I see.../I hear... "

2. FEELINGS



How I feel (emotion or sensation rather
then thought) in relation to what I
observe. Feeling you can show with your
body, thoughts are hard to show.
"I feel..."

3. NEEDS



What I need that causes my feelings.
You can use the table with needs to help
you define it.
"... because I need... "

4. REQUESTS



The concrete action I would like to be
taken. It is not a demand so be prepared
to hear "no".
"Would you be willing to... ?"



The steps of a giraffe

The **basic outline of the model** is the following:

When I see that _____

I feel _____

because my need for _____ is/is not met.

Would you be willing to _____?

Exercise: Multiple choice NVC



Choose the correct option. Which one is non-violent?

1) first step: observations

- a) you are always late
- b) you are late again
- c) you are 15 minutes late

1) second step: feelings

- a) you disrespect me
- b) I feel disrespected
- c) I'm done with it

3) third step: needs

- a) I need to be respected
- b) I need to release my anger on you
- c) I need you to be better

4) fourth step: requests

- a) I would like you to let me know when you are late
- b) I want you to stop annoying me
- c) Please be on time

4. Cultural awareness

Introduction

The foundation for real dialogue is having an **attitude with cultural awareness**. This attitude is therefore the behavioral change that we generate and perpetuate through the Democratic Dialogue methodology.

This attitude ensures that the teachers' capacity to act is increased and that they take responsibility for their own well-being and that of their colleagues and students. The teaching profession is a demanding one and unfortunately, teacher burnout rates are increasingly a common issue in the world. Teachers need to trust in themselves in order to do their work and to increase their resilience. Having an attitude of cultural awareness builds **trust** so that teachers find the safety in themselves and the other to turn conflict-sensitive situations into an enriching and connecting learning moment.

Improving the dialogue between teacher and student will eventually **lower indirectly discriminatory barriers** to education. And more accessible education leads to a **better quality of life** for the student.

Cultural awareness has **two aspects**:

- ***The cultural self-awareness***

Gain insight into one's own cultural values and norms by reflecting on one's own cultural position in relation to the other.

- ***The general cultural awareness***

To be able to recognize culturally or philosophically sensitive themes and to act empathetically and constructively and to enter into a dialogue.

Change of the behavior

From the theory of behavioral change, we mainly assume that individuals must first be aware of the importance of an open dialogue attitude towards people with a different ethnic-cultural background and that they must want to change (this can be learned through exercises around self-awareness).. After that, it becomes important that they acquire knowledge and skills (dialogue skills, communication strategies) to change their behavior in order to practice and apply the behavioral change in daily life.

To really achieve sustainable behavioral change, it is important that learners are regularly reminded to implement their behavioral change.

ACTIVITIES



1. Group activity for both teachers and students

Statements and reflective questions about politics

Please check the [activity doc](#)

Module 1 - Activity 1: Statements and reflective questions about politics

2. Scenario-based activity for the DD@S course participants

Game cards to guide a democratic dialogue on climate crisis

Please check the [activity doc](#)

Module 1 – Activity 2: ‘Game cards to guide a democratic dialogue on climate crisis’

3. Scenario-based activity for the class

Parliamentary debate - role play

Please check the [activity doc](#)

Module 1 – Activity 3: Parliamentary debate - role play

TIPS



Useful tips

- ✓ Before starting the dialogue, ensure a **calm and secure environment**
- ✓ Try and remain **calm** on hearing outrageous statements.
- ✓ If necessary, accompany the youngster to a **peaceful spot** where he / she can calm down.
- ✓ Make **clear commitments** with the students. Emphasize that we will talk about our thoughts on what happened without passing judgement. **Each and every opinion counts and is worth reflecting on.**
- ✓ Ensure that your **body language and posture** show openness and genuine interest.
- ✓ Project **trust**.
- ✓ Grant enough **time** and **opportunities** to voice all the opinions.
- ✓ Show respect by **listening actively**.
- ✓ Grant everyone, including the **quieter ones**, the opportunity to speak.

- ✓ Dig deeper: identify the **underlying arguments** on which the student bases his/her reasoning. What are the real grounds?
- ✓ Request **clarification** if you do not understand something.
- ✓ **Review** with a critical eye the discourse held: understand the underlying reasoning: 'What do you mean by?', 'Is that always the case?', 'can you give an example please?' etc.
- ✓ **Paraphrase** / check your interpretation regularly with questions: 'If I have understood you correctly, you mean the following ... ?'
- ✓ Pay special attention to the reliability of the **source of information** and reference frameworks: 'What is your point of view based on?', 'Where did you find this information?' etc.
- ✓ Show **empathy**: 'Can you imagine that ...?', 'Can this be compared to ...?' etc.
- ✓ **Summarize briefly** what the dialogue was about. What were the most important insights? Ask the students what they have remembered.
- ✓ Ask the students about their **expectations** on how they would like to proceed. This gives them joint **responsibility**, which can motivate them to actively seek a solution.
- ✓ Which questions remain **unanswered**? Does this dialogue lead to **new questions**? Do they need a follow-up session? If so, try to plan a session together.

- ✓ **Broadening the debate:** Together with the students, examine existing material on the subject concerned in greater depth in order to avoid generalizations and misunderstandings. For example, if youngsters associate terrorism solely with islam, it can be a good idea to dedicate a session to the subject of terrorism throughout history.
- ✓ **Take emotions seriously** and grant the opportunity to voice *emotions* within a dialogue. Emotions can run high (both for youngsters and the moderator) and this can sometimes hamper the possibility of a dialogue. Understanding how emotions – of both students and teacher- play a role in dealing with these subjects is an essential part of the dialogue process.
- ✓ Besides communication techniques, it is also important to pay attention to the use of **coping strategies**. Instead of an evasive coping strategy, which denies or avoids a sensitive topic, it is recommended to use a proactive strategy to start a constructive dialogue.

Useful Reading



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Well done!
Now it's "quiz time"!
Then you can try the next module!



CARDET



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