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

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

Module 3 Activity 2

""From Polarization to Constructive Dialogue: Navigating Controversial Issues"

A scenario-based activity for teachers to address controversial issues in the classroom.

Short description	**A scenario-based activity for teachers/school principals/school staff (and/or even parents), working in pairs (or small groups) & plenary discussion aiming at preparing teachers to introduce and address controversial issues in class through constructive dialogue.**
Facilitator & target group	Facilitator: one or more instructors/trainers' trainers Adult learners – school teachers/staff
Indicative time	50-70 minutes
Objectives	● Raise trainees' awareness about the importance of addressing controversial issues such as race, gender, sexuality and abilities in the classroom. ● Build the capacity of trainees (teachers) to identify biases and stereotypes that individuals might inaccurately use as evidence in controversial issues. ● Build the capacity of trainees (teachers) to apply effective communication strategies to engage students in respectful and productive conversations related to controversial issues (e.g., about race, gender, sexuality, and abilities). ● Build the capacity of trainees (teachers) to apply effective strategies to introduce and address controversial issues about race, gender, sexuality, and abilities in the classroom.
Materials	Handout of the "From Polarization to Constructive Dialogue: Navigating Controversial Issues" scenarios (available here in print format) Class environment: ● Classroom or paper board and markers E-learning environment:

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	● Enabling break-out rooms that allow you to split your online meeting into separate sessions (depending on the platform you use, e.g., Zoom or Webex you can search for the instructions). ● Whiteboard feature that allows you to share a whiteboard with the other participants (depending on the platform you use, e.g., Zoom or Webex you can search for the instructions). ● Alternatively, in an online environment you can use a shared Google .doc or dropbox paper. ● Instructions on how to share files from Google Drive https://support.google.com/docs/answer/2494822. Instructions on How to create a Dropbox Paper doc https://help.dropbox.com/files-folders/paper/create-doc
Preparation for the teacher	Controversial issues can provoke strong feelings and divide people, as two (or more) opposing views might be valid. The aim is to engage students in deliberation, allowing them to form their arguments based on evidence and not biases or stereotypes. As a facilitator, you can provide examples regarding the following: ● importance and benefits of addressing controversial issues in the classroom such as helping students develop empathy and understanding, bringing real-life issues in class to engage students, encouraging civic participation and democratic citizenship, and building communication and critical thinking skills (evaluating evidence, addressing biases and stereotypes). ● effective communication strategies to discuss controversial issues such as active listening, respectful language, empathy, constructive dialogue, diversity, group discussions reflection, etc. ● strategies and activities designed to introduce and address controversial issues such as using case studies, debates, role-playing, literature discussions, and podcast listening. A teacher can apply various teaching approaches when students are engaged in a debate or discussion around controversial issues such as: **Neutral chairperson' approach**: remaining neutral and only guiding discussions without sharing personal opinions. This can prevent influence but might be hard to maintain, especially when ill-shaped views are discussed. It could unintentionally reinforce existing attitudes and doubt the teacher's credibility.

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	'Balanced' approach- presenting various perspectives on an issue without revealing the teacher's own stance. It shows that issues are complex but might give the impression that all opinions are equally valid. It could also reinforce existing biases.
	Devil's Advocate Approach: taking an opposing view to encourage diverse perspectives. It helps promote multiple viewpoints, but students might mistakenly think the teacher holds those opposing beliefs. If done too convincingly, it could strengthen existing biases.
	Stated Commitment Approach: sharing their own views during discussions. It provides a model for handling controversies, but the students might adopt the teacher's view just because it's their teacher's.
	Ally Approach: supporting a student or group's side. This gives weaker or marginalized students a voice, but it might seem like the teacher is pushing a personal agenda or showing favoritism.
	Official Line Approach: aligning with the stance dictated by authorities. This offers legitimacy and protection but may compromise teachers who disagree. Students might think their discussions are irrelevant if only one view matters (Stradling, 1984).
	Selecting an approach is context- and case-specific; there is no one-size-fits-all.
	You can read the "additional resources" proposed, to prepare some indicative strategies in relation to the scenario.
Methodology - steps	1. Explain the objective of the exercise to the participants. For example: "During this activity, we will engage with real-life scenarios related to how to approach controversial issues in class".
	2. It is also important to establish ground rules. For example, you can explain to the trainees, that this is a free open space, where each must respect what the other is saying without interrupting or laughing, that everybody's input is equally valued, and that no idea is bad.
	3. Divide trainees into pairs or small groups.
	4. Give each pair (or small group) one of the 4 cases/scenarios, provided in the handout below, and ask them to discuss the questions.
	5. Ask all pairs to proceed to the implementation of the tasks given in the handout, based on their personal knowledge, experiences and/or opinions. You can have group discussions in a class environment or online group discussions/break out rooms or even send personal/private messages to each other in e-learning environment.

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	6. Give them 20 minutes to prepare. 7. Ask all pairs/groups to present their thoughts/answers on their task. Give them 5 minutes to present them. You can also ask them to have 1 spokesperson per group. 8. After each presentation ask the other pairs/groups to share their thoughts and proposals on the specific task.
Debriefing and evaluation	Keep notes, as a facilitator, creating basic guidelines and strategies for introducing and addressing controversial issues in class. Upon completing this activity, encourage reflection with questions such as: ● How did you feel while you did the activity? ● What was one of the challenges of doing this activity? ● What was one thing that you learned, and will implement in class? ● How ready do you feel after this activity to introduce and address controversial issues?
Tips for the teacher (optional)	The scenario activity involves cases where teachers might have the chance to introduce discussions around controversial issues (scenarios 3 and 4) or address controversial issues that students might bring up (scenarios 1 and 2). In all cases, the focus is on what communication strategies the teachers can use and what activities they can organize to engage students in a democratic dialogue; these can be similar regardless of the topic. A variety of topics is given in an attempt to view various potential cases where people can hold strong opinions.
Follow-up suggestions (optional)	As a follow-up, the participants can share their personal experiences, discussing any controversies they might have faced in class.
Reference/ source:	Sætra, E. (2020). Discussing controversial issues in the classroom: elements of good practice. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 65*(2), 345–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1705897 Reynolds, H. M., Silvernell, D., & Mercer, F. (2020). Teaching in an era of political divisiveness: An exploration of strategies for discussing controversial issues. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *93*(4), 205–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2020.1762063
Additional resources and related	● Teaching Controversial Issues - Living with controversy ● Video Tutorials: Teaching Controversial Issues ● Managing Controversy: Developing a Strategy for Handling Controversy and Teaching Controversial Issues in Schools ● Teaching Controversial Issues: A guide for teachers

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material (optional)	● Learning to teach controversial Issues - You want to teach what?

Handout | "From Polarization to Constructive Dialogue: Navigating Controversial Issues"

Scenario 1: You have added a new book to the syllabus of 2nd grade English Literature, in the lower secondary school where you are working (students aged 13-14). The book features typically marginalized personas, specifically LGBTQI+ characters and themes. During the school year, you overhear a student stating that nowadays cinema and books present LGBTQI+ characters to be relevant and attract audiences and they shouldn't do it all the time. In which ways will you engage students in respectful and productive conversations around this?

Scenario 2: During a religious education lesson, in the 2nd grade of upper secondary school (students aged 16-17), a student raises the question regarding why learning about religion is part of their school curriculum, but they do not have the choice to take classes in different religions. In which ways will you engage students in respectful and productive conversations around this?

Scenario 3: Your school organises a weekly campaign in the framework of World Down Syndrome Day. You aim to organise a discussion about whether special education schools should be separate from general schools. In which ways will you engage students in respectful and productive conversations around this?

Scenario 4: You are teaching History in the 3rd grade of upper secondary school (students aged 17-18). Your next topic relates to the aftermath of World War II. During the lesson, you will refer to the displacement of millions of people, including the huge waves of refugees and survivors of the Holocaust. Considering that refugeeism is still evident, you want to grab this opportunity to introduce the controversial issue of whether countries should open their borders to all refugees and migrants. In which ways will you engage students in respectful and productive conversations around this?

TASK FOR THE GROUP

- After reading the scenario assigned to your pair/group please have a group discussion in the class environment or online group discussions/break-out rooms.
- You have 15-20 minutes to prepare. For each scenario/case, you have to complete the following:

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- o Identify the opposing views on the controversial issues given in each scenario. Are there any hidden biases/stereotypes that people might inaccurately use as evidence to support their opinions?
- o Note down at least 3 reasons why it is key to prepare students for controversial issues, by referring to the negative consequences of polarization and stereotypes perpetuation within and beyond class, for all individuals in each case.
- o Think of effective communication strategies you could apply to properly handle the controversial issues in class.
- o For each case, design one activity you could implement in class, with your students, to navigate the controversial topics (e.g., related to race, gender, and disabilities).
- Then you will be asked to present your thoughts/answers on your task.
- Each pair/group will have 5 minutes to present and you can also decide to have 1 spokesperson per group.
- After each presentation the other pairs/groups will be asked to share their thoughts and proposals on each scenario. Group discussion.