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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 3

“Discussing controversial issues in class”

A real-life scenario to discuss gender-related controversial issues, for upper secondary school students aged 16+

Short description	<p>This activity aims to engage students in a respectful discussion around a controversial issue, that of trans athletes’ participation in sports competitions according to their gender identity. The activity will cultivate students’ empathy towards vulnerable individuals but primarily focus on preparing them to participate in deliberative democracy.</p>
Facilitator & target group	<p>Facilitator(s): One or several secondary school teachers Target Group: 6-30 students, aged 16+, divided into two groups for the debate and 3-6 groups for the following discussion</p>
Indicative time	<p>90 -100 minutes</p>
Objectives	<p>By participating in this activity, students will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● value the importance of human rights and inclusivity regardless of one’s gender identity. ● discuss controversial issues related to gender, with respect, empathy and understanding of multiple perspectives. ● formulate and evaluate arguments for controversial issues related to gender identity.
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Copies of “The contrasting viewpoints” handout & the task for each group (one copy per group – available in print format here)
Preparation for the teacher	<p>This activity explores transgender rights. Before engaging in this activity, it is important that as a facilitator you are familiar and feel comfortable with the concepts explored. For this, you can consult and explore the following resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This article defining L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+



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- The [National Center for Transgender Equality](#) website includes answers to frequently asked questions and guidelines on how to be respectful and supportive towards transgender people. There is a [dedicated section about the latest laws and policies](#) affecting trans people.
- [The Human Rights Campaign](#) aims to educate the public about the transgender community and provides resources to support transgender and non-binary people.
- [Transgender Lives: Your Stories](#) is an editorial campaign created by *The New York Times* to allow transgender people to tell their stories.
- [Top Five Points for Allies of Transgender People To Remember](#)
- [Fair Play: The Importance of Sports Participation for Transgender Youth](#)
- [How Some States Are Moving to Restrict Transgender Women in Sports](#)
- [The Truth About Trans Athletes](#)

The activity is focused on a current debate over the participation of trans people in sports depending on their gender identity. This is a common discussion topic in the U.S. where a wave of lawsuits aims to prohibit transgender girls from participating in girls' competitions. The main argument relates to the biological differences in testosterone levels which are higher in individuals that are assigned as male at birth, after puberty. Yet, there is lack of strong scientific data showing that testosterone levels are correlated with improved athletic performance (Karkazis, 2019). Despite this, sports policies and legislation have made a requirement to have low testosterone levels to participate in competitions and as a result, transgender athletes undergo hormone therapies to achieve that (Reynolds & Jahromi, 2021). Due to irregularities in policies, researchers suggest that universal rules are formed and applied, to respect and "include transgender athletes in sports competitions while being fair to all athletes" (Reynolds & Jahromi, 2021, p. 3). Science evidence might be used to support either end. For this, an integrated approach, which often comes up as a potential solution to the controversy, is that of having an "open" category, not gender specific. This has also received criticism, as an approach which is not inclusive and further reinforces the idea that trans women are not women, having to compete in separate categories.

Even though the topic focuses on actions taken in the U.S., the transgender rights affect us all; they are human rights that extend beyond borders. Individuals who identify as transgenders face discrimination all over the world while actions are taken in Europe to achieve equality. Before starting this activity, explore the current situation in your country, regarding L.G.B.T.Q.I.+ , particularly trans', rights. For instance, [this Trans Rights map illustrates how trans people are](#)



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	<p><u>protected</u> across Europe and some areas in Asia, across different life areas. Numerous human rights further encompass sports rights such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the <u>Universal Declaration on Human Rights</u> says everyone has the rights to freedom of association, health, rest and leisure, and to participate in cultural life • the <u>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</u> says everyone has the right to freedom of association and the <u>International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</u> recognises the rights to health and cultural life • the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child identifies the rights to rest, leisure and participation in cultural life, which include <u>participation in sport</u>, as does the <u>Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities</u> • UNESCO’s <u>International Charter of Physical Education and Sport</u> identifies sport as a fundamental right, as does the International Olympic Committee” (Been, 2021)
<p>Methodology - steps</p>	<p>Start with an introduction to diversity & gender.</p> <p>Ask students what they think diversity is (give a definition). This is an open, warm-up discussion, with questions like “What makes us the same? What makes us different?”.</p> <p>Students might refer to personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and abilities. This is a starting point for you to explain and define gender identity, to have common ground. Discussions around gender should clarify to students that gender does not relate to our biological reproductive systems, the way we are born, but to the way we feel, understand, and express ourselves. At birth, we are typically assigned male or female, but other gender identities exist, including nonbinary, agender or genderqueer. Transgender is a term individuals might use to describe themselves, meaning that their gender identity is different from the one they were told when they were born.</p> <p>Make sure that the language you use is inclusive, respecting people’s individuality. Thus, instead of saying “they <i>are</i> transgender”, making gender something definitive, use the verb “they <i>identify</i> as transgender”.</p> <p>At this point, you can refer to different individuals’ gender identities (e.g., real-life celebrities, etc.).</p> <p>Organize a debate around a controversial issue.</p>



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Explain to students what is defined as controversial issue (you can adapt Module 3, Activity 1, for this).

Divide the class into two teams who will debate with each other, either in favor of or against the topic (pro and con teams). Then, you can introduce the controversial issue in relation to gender which the teams will have to debate about: “Transgender athletes should compete in sports according to their gender identity”.

Give students plenty of time to research online and prepare their arguments before the debate runs. This could include researching science-based evidence around biology and the human body, sports, and gender. You can curate a collection of resources, following the WebQuest format¹, for more guided inquiry. See the additional material provided at the end of this table. This research can be extended over a period of time, for instance you can assign it as homework over a week, or during the debate-oriented lesson, depending on your classroom dynamics (e.g., if students are familiar with debates, the topic, the time you have available, etc.).

The debate can have various formats. You can have the teams take turns expressing arguments and counterarguments or have the teams express various /all opinions at a certain time.

You can act as a moderator, to keep track of time and intervene, if necessary.

Conduct the debate.

It is key to set some ground rules before the debate starts. For instance, disrespectful or harmful comments are not allowed (the team might automatically lose), and all team members should respect their classmates. Prepare these rules with your students on the whiteboard or a piece of paper and ask them to sign a “contract”. Clarify to the students that all opinions are welcomed, provided that they are respectfully communicated. If it is the first time your students are engaged in debates, you can dedicate some time in the beginning for relevant instruction (e.g., examples of good statements backed up by evidence, etc.).

While the debate is running, encourage students to listen respectfully to each other and to ask questions for clarification or to challenge each other's arguments.

Run a reflection and debriefing session. You could ask the following questions:

- How did you feel during the activity? Was it difficult to adopt a position?

¹ <http://academics.smcvt.edu/cbauer-ramazani/TESOL/NNETESOL/WebQuests/definition.htm>



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How difficult / easy was it to answer the questions? Which ones were the most difficult and why? • Did you have any doubts when answering the questions? What were they? • What was your opinion(s) before the debate? Were they different from the stance you had to take? <p>Ask participants to make smaller groups of 3-6 people.</p> <p>Give groups copies of the handout “The contrasting viewpoints”. Ask them to read the article and discuss the questions in their teams. The story is given as a starting point to better understand the experiences and feelings of a transgender individual directly impacted by sports regulations.</p>
<p>Debriefing and evaluation</p>	<p>Start with a general overview of the activity and ask the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel during the exercise? Was it difficult or easy to construct arguments depending on the stance you had to take? • What do you think would be the consequences of totally restricting trans athletes’ access to competitions based on their gender identity? • What other restrictions might trans individuals around the world face? • What are the next steps sports organizations could take to respect human rights while also addressing concerns about competition integrity?
<p>Tips for the teacher (optional)</p>	<p>The aim of this activity is to help students engage in a democratic dialogue, exploring different perspectives on a controversial issue in today’s society and cultivating empathy towards vulnerable individuals who face discrimination on the basis of their gender identity. It is important to clarify to students that the arguments they have to construct for the debate do not necessarily reflect their opinions but rather the different viewpoints of individuals in society. Encourage students to share their experiences and perspectives and look for commonalities that can serve as a starting point for the conversation. Monitor the emotions of the students during the discussion. If a student becomes upset, validate their feelings and offer support. Encourage students to take a break if they need one.</p> <p>Exploring such a controversy does not mean that we need to find a consensus. However, a discussion around what can be done to solve this controversy can be raised (e.g., involve transgender athletes in the policy-making process, training of</p>



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	<p>sports stakeholders on gender diversity, competition categories based on physiology rather than gender, a case-by-case evaluation process, etc.).</p> <p>The resources provided can also be distributed with your students, if you adapt them as needed, to match their language and age level.</p>
<p>Follow-up suggestions (optional)</p>	<p>Marginalized communities experience multiple forms of discrimination and oppression on the basis of their identity. Thus, an activity covering intersectionality can follow, in the form of debate or discussion. For instance, you can use the case of Noor Alexandria Abukaram who in 2019 was disqualified for running on a hijab as a starting point and expand it to explore the perspective of a Muslim or Black trans woman athlete.</p>
<p>Reference/ source:</p>	<p>The inspiration for this topic is drawn from the Resource Guide: Transgender Identities and Rights, in the section “Teaching with News” by the Choices Programme of Brown University. The lesson plan which informed the development of this activity is titled Talking with students about transgender athletes, by Tooley Skye, 2021.</p> <p>The story is retrieved from Goldberg’s article titled “Fair Play: The Importance of Sports Participation for Transgender Youth”, where a collection of real-life from interviews with trans athletes is included. The stories were collected through networks of advocacy organizations, including Athlete Ally and OutSports.</p> <p>Other references cited:</p> <p>Breen, C. (2021). <i>The debate over transgender athletes’ rights is testing the current limits of science and the law</i>. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/the-debate-over-transgender-athletes-right-s-is-testing-the-current-limits-of-science-and-the-law-162593</p> <p>Reynolds, A., & Jahromi, A. H. (2021). Transgender athletes in sports competitions: How policy measures can be more inclusive and fairer to all. <i>Frontiers in Sports and Active Living</i>, 3. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.704178</p>
<p>Additional resources and related material (optional)</p>	<p>The following articles can be adapted (simplified) and provided to the students as tools to construct their arguments in the debate (for beginners in debates):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Athletics banned transgender women from competing. Does science support the rule? – the article refers to studies conducted on the topic, presenting arguments that both pro and con teams can use when taking views.



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- [Swimming Announces 'Open' Category For Transgender Athletes—Here Are The Other Major Sports With Restrictions Or Bans](#): a FORBES article presenting the restrictions imposed on transgender women and comments from both perspectives.
- [Evaluating the Credibility of Information Sources](#): a short guide on how to critically evaluate the information you read.

Handout | The contrasting viewpoints

Ask students to read the following article: [Expert: Science won't resolve debates about trans athletes](#), a Q&A with endocrinologist Bradley Anawalt who explains the disagreement around the access to sports competitions for transgender females.

You can modify and simplify this to match the language and/or age level of your students.

TASK FOR THE GROUP

After reading the article, discuss the questions below in your group. Prepare a short report to present to the rest of the group, based on your answers to the last two questions. You will have about 2-3 minutes for your presentation.

Questions:

- What are the two essential disagreements outlined in the text?
- How do these disagreements relate to both science and social justice?
- How do feelings and emotions impact the ongoing disagreement about this issue?
- After reading the text, what are your thoughts and feelings about the challenges discussed surrounding transgender athletes participation in sports?



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