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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 1

“Navigating controversies through education: why it matters”

Raising teachers’ awareness about the importance of addressing controversial issues in the classroom

Short description	The “Navigating controversies through education: why it matters” activity helps teachers recognize the importance of raising discussions around controversial issues in the classroom. The teachers will reflect on which topics constitute controversies and discuss the challenges associated with their teaching.
Objectives	Upon completing the activity, the teachers will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify what constitutes a controversial issue. • recognize the importance of addressing controversial issues such as race, gender, sexuality, and abilities in the classroom. • describe the challenges and potential solutions in engaging students in discussions around controversies.
Indicative time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 – 45 minutes
Facilitator & target group	Facilitator(s): One or two adult trainers Target Group: 6-12 Teachers/educators
Methodology - steps	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain the objective of the exercise using simple words, such as the following: “During this activity, we will discuss the importance of addressing controversial issues in class, exploring the challenges and potential solutions associated with that”. 2. Establish ground rules. Explain to the participants, 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. Ask the participants to give you examples of topics that can raise controversies in societies. You can use a whiteboard, cardboard, or digital polling tool to create a word cloud of topics that may provoke controversies (topics that typically divide communities and create polarization, strong feelings, etc.). For instance: religion, race, abilities, sexuality, food, politics etc.



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4. Prepare a list of controversial statements and ask the participants to come up with additional statements they might have faced or can think of. Focus on gender, race, sexuality, and abilities. Examples include:

- National borders should be open to all refugees and migrants.
- Individuals should access public restrooms based on their gender identity (e.g., trans women accessing female restrooms).
- Schools should teach comprehensive sex education.
- Students with disabilities should be included in mainstream classrooms.

Clarify to the participants that controversial issues are those that cause strong emotions and divide societies. There is no one definition but rather some characteristics that the controversial issues can have. In general, controversial issues involve value and opinion-based judgements, are critical and of interest to people, and we might not be able to settle them with evidence (Claire & Holden, 2007; Wellington, 1986). They can be categorised as closed, open or placed somewhere in the middle. According to Hand (2008), controversial issues might have two rational opposing views; these can be considered open questions. Issues already empirically (or scientifically) settled, such as whether the Holocaust existed or not, do not constitute open controversial issues anymore. Whether a question is open or settled, changes over time (Hess, 2010). Thus, the question “Should women vote?” was considered open at some point, in the past, but now there is a broad-based consensus that has settled this; thus, it is false to provide it as a controversial issue.

5. Ask the teachers to create a mind map (on paper or digitally) indicating the opposing views for each argument, specifically what someone who is in favour and what someone who is against the statement would support. At this point, they can mention both valid and inaccurate, misinterpreted evidence that people use to cover their biases. For instance, someone in favour of closed national borders might strongly believe that all refugees and migrants are criminals (stereotype).

6. Divide teachers into small groups of 3-4 participants. In their groups, they have to answer the following questions:

- Why is it important to address controversial issues related to race, gender, sexuality, and abilities in the classroom? Come up with at least 4 reasons, mentioning the benefits of introducing such issues or the negative consequences of not.
- How can engaging with these topics contribute to students' learning experiences and personal growth?
- What challenges do teaching controversial issues raise? How can we overcome these?



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Among others, discussing controversial issues has the following benefits (Council of Europe, 2016):

- Prepares the youth to participate in democratic citizenship, by connecting school with real life and enhancing the youth's social and political education. For instance, students need a lot of practice to make decisions about controversial issues, to effectively take part in democracy.
- Promotes interdisciplinary knowledge and holistic personal development, by connecting different topics (social, race, gender, cultural, and historical studies among others).
- Develops young students' critical and analytics skills, to learn how to evaluate evidence and arguments, detect biases and make their own judgement with reasoning and evidence. This covers media literacy for young students to critically evaluate the information they consume.
- Helps young students explore their emotions and clarify their values, becoming allies of vulnerable individuals and protectors of human rights, in cases controversies violate them.
- Creates a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for all students to express themselves; teachers can proactively address controversies that the students might bring up, regardless of the topic.

The challenges teachers might face include, among others:

- Presenting an issue as more open (for students to see multiple perspectives students) or more settled (for students to build one opinion, the one given to them as right).
- Facing resistance from parents, and the wider community who might feel that teachers want to convince their students to form a specific viewpoint (pushing an agenda).
- Uncomfortable feelings, they or their students might feel.

Tips on how to tackle such challenges:

- Preparation: make sure students are prepared by fostering a safe and inclusive environment, and understand what controversial issues exist, which are more open, and which are more settled.
- Defining the learning objective, whether a more open controversy will be used as a starting point for students to participate in a democratic dialogue, starting to form their own opinion or a more settled controversy will be used as a starting point for students to identify biases/stereotypes. When the aim is to promote deliberation and a discussion, not a debate, you can frame an issue in the form of a question. Instead of asking 'Should transgender athletes participate in sports competitions according to their gender identity' you can ask 'How can we promote inclusivity in sports



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	<p>while retaining fair competition among all? Teachers need to guide students in their inquiry, rather than impose their views.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have high-quality curriculum material. • Have specific models of discussion for students to engage in these discussions. • Getting to know your students, their background and cultural beliefs which might affect their viewpoints. • Discuss with parents/guardians the aim of introducing and addressing controversial issues: preparing students to live wisely in a democratic society, rather than pushing your viewpoints to them. <p>8. Conclude the activity by asking the participants reflective questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the activity make you feel? • How did your team work together? • How confident do you feel introducing and addressing controversial issues in the classroom?
<p>Materials & Resources – tools for class and/or e-learning environment</p>	<p>Class environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom or paper board and markers • Digital mind map creation tool (e.g., MindMup) <p>eLearning environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital mind map creation tool (e.g., MindMup) • 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
<p>Reference/ source:</p>	<p>The inspiration for this activity is drawn from the Living with Controversy – Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE), a Council of Europe training pack to support and promote the teaching of controversial issues in schools in Europe.</p>



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Additional resources and related material (optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An activity to recognise the difference between settled and open controversies: Copy of Controversial Conversations 1: Open and Settled Questions.docx - Google Docs• Teaching About Controversial Topics (Issues), Diana Hess, a video explaining and defining settled and open controversies, with practices to engage students in discussions around politically oriented controversial issues.• Difficult Dialogues, Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt U, a practice guide on how to teach and approach “hot topics” discussions.• Collaborative deliberation in the classroom, Barton & Ho, 2023, a problem-based approach to contentious issues.
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