

# EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: THEORY AND TEACHING PRACTICE

Session 6 (c): *Exploring the controversial aspects of social issues and their management in the classroom*

European Wergeland Centre

Being able to safely and respectfully engage a class of students in the discussion of controversial issues that evoke a wide range of reactions in society as well as among the students is something that teachers who have been trained as to how to do this effectively are able to manage on a daily basis as competent and skilled classroom practitioners. It is therefore important that teacher students also have opportunities to experience such training. Learning how to work with controversial issues before entering the classroom prepares teacher students to deal with discussions – whether they become heated or cool off quickly to near silence - and gives them more confidence that they usually lack in the beginning of their teaching practice. The following paper offers a brief overview of what controversial issues in education are, why it is important to work on controversial issues in the classroom, and how to introduce controversial issues in pre-service teacher education.

## 1. Controversial Issues in Education

### What are controversial issues?

“Controversial issues may be defined as issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society”<sup>1</sup>. Controversial issues have several fundamental characteristics. They divide opinions in the society and evoke strong feelings. This aspect of “division” is how controversial issues are different, for example, from sensitive issues that can also be quite emotional for the discussants, but do not provoke debates. For example, natural disasters and their consequences are a sensitive topic. However, this topic does not necessarily lead to a heated discussion. At the same time, the triggers of natural disasters can be controversial. Climate activists or convinced scientists often point at climate change as one of the disaster precursors, while “climate sceptics”, who deny that climate change is there and that it significantly affects human lives, oppose this opinion.

Moreover, controversial issues exist only in a certain context at a certain point in time. 100 years ago, in many countries the notion of divorce led to emotional discussions and divided the society. Today, a much larger number of people in the world accept divorce as a regular social practice. However, there are still regions and religions where the divorce cases evoke heated debates.

Therefore, controversial issues can be defined as:

- ***Divisive and Emotional;***
- ***Temporal and Contextual.***

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<sup>1</sup> Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (2015). *Living with Controversy: Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE). Training Pack for Teachers*. Strasbourg, p. 13.

These characteristics largely define how and why one teaches controversial issues. Dialogue on controversial issues is an intrinsic part of a democratic society. They directly affect citizens, including children and young people and therefore, should be integrated into an educational process. While being highly relevant, controversial issues might also lead to dangerous consequences in society, such as violence and conflict, if not handled properly. It is highly important that teacher is not only willing but is most importantly capable of managing controversies in the classroom.

### Why teaching controversial issues?

One's ability to engage in a dialogue with someone whose opinion is radically different is an essential competency for living in and supporting a democratic culture. It requires competences that can be developed at school through learning the skills of discussing and formulating an independent opinion on the issue that directly affects the student's life. Development of such competences has already become an integral component of school curricula all over the world, so **often the teacher is required to be able to work with controversial issues.**

Media and other informational resources often have their own agenda when discussing controversial issues and, consequently, do not always address these topics appropriately and holistically. The capacity to assess the information critically and define one's own point of view on the issues can be developed in the classroom. **A teacher has an opportunity to properly address the issues that are inadequately addressed by the media.**

It might appear paradoxical, but **teaching controversial issues makes classroom and the school as well, as ultimately, communities and society safer** for all involved in the dialogue on the issue. It helps to build and support "safe spaces" within classrooms and the whole school as a foundation for inclusive and democratic environment. A prepared teacher has more control over the situation when initiating a conversation on a controversial topic, which allows for establishing the rules of such a conversation and helps to create an atmosphere for safe, open and critical reflections on various issues. To assure the safety of all the stakeholders involved in these discussions, it is important that these principles are also respected by the school as a whole. Controversies are intrinsic to many school subjects and problems that need to be tackled, like bullying, discrimination or hate speech. School management should create the conditions in which staff, students and parents would feel safe initiating discussions on debatable topics and elaborate a strategy in case if such a discussion leads to a conflict or consequences in or outside the school<sup>2</sup>.

In its turn, the possibility of being safely engaged in the discussion of socially relevant divisive problems and an ability to respectfully engage in this discussion is one of the necessary conditions for the **prevention of youth radicalization**. There is an established

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (2017). *Managing Controversy: Developing a Strategy for Handling Controversy and Teaching Controversial Issues in Schools. A Self-Reflection Tool for School Leaders and Senior Managers.*

consensus among experts<sup>3</sup> that the lack of involvement in the dialogue and the decision - making process on the issues that directly affect young people and, consequently, the absence of perspectives of such a participation and change, can make some young people turn to radical ideologies.

## 2. Controversial Issues in Pre-service Teacher Education

### Why teaching how to teach controversial issues?

Nowadays, it is necessary for the teacher to have an understanding of not only how students learn, but also how they evolve within a social context. Such an understanding implies pedagogical knowledge, knowledge about teaching students with diverse views and backgrounds, as well as knowledge about creating conditions for safe and productive classroom. **Learning how to deal with controversial issues in the classroom helps to develop the foundation for effective teaching.**

Among these fundamentals are **the skills of self-reflection on personal and professional experience and conscious action based on self-awareness**. To become an agent of change, the teacher as a reflecting practitioner should be able to analyze their practice and professional role<sup>4</sup>. Teaching controversial issues requires the ability to analyze one's own "personal baggage", i.e. views and convictions, and how this relates one's professional role as a teacher in order to successfully moderate a dialogue on a controversial issue, where opposite views can be expressed.

**Creating safe environment in the classroom** is one of the teacher's main tasks. Classroom is a social community where a culture of democracy can be practiced. For obtaining such an experience certain routines and rules of active listening, respectful communication and cooperation should be elaborated by students and the teacher. Discussion of controversial issues can serve as a basis for the establishment or practice of these routines.

As mentioned above, controversial issues in many contexts are part of the curriculum. To be able to fully implement the curriculum, it is often expected the teacher should be able to lead a discussion on a divisive topic in the classroom. At the same time, teaching controversial issues requires particular teaching methods. While in many other situations referring to evidence would be enough, controversial issues cannot be dealt only by reference to facts. Such methods should allow to manage the diversity of opinions, unexpected topics or actions. Thus, **learning how to teach controversial issues enriches and diversifies a teacher's "methodical toolbox"**.

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<sup>3</sup> Tibbitts, F. L. (2020). Deliberative democratic decision making, universal values, and cultural pluralism: A proposed contribution to the prevention of violent extremism through education. PROSPECTS, 48(1), 79–94.

<sup>4</sup> Gollob, R. (2020). Experts for Learning in Practice. A Manual for Mentors of Teacher Students. Zürich and Oslo: The European Wergeland Centre (EWC), PH Zürich – Department IPE.

### How to teach how to teach controversial issues?

A lecturer should have **two challenges in mind** when planning a session or a series of sessions on controversial issues with teacher students.

- Most importantly, they have *little or no practical experience*. Effective work with controversial issues in the classroom requires a multitude of well-developed competences – skills, sensitivity and a professional judgement on how to organize work in the classroom. When in-service teacher training on controversial issues is organized, the trainer builds on teachers' experiences and helps to develop lacking competences. Before obtaining significant experience in the classroom, it is hard to reflect on which difficulties can be met and which support is needed to prepare for them. Therefore, in case of controversial issues in pre-service teacher education, one teaches by aspirations.
- Secondly, teacher students often *lack pedagogical confidence*. They avoid working with controversial issues out of fear of conflicts with students or their parents, out of fear of losing control in the classroom. At the same time, *false confidence* can also lead to wrong pedagogical choices and affect safety in the classroom.

There are certain **recommendations** that the lecturer can follow to deal with the aforementioned challenges.

- Since controversial issues are emotional, they are also experiential. Practical experiences and self-reflection are fundamental to developing teacher students' competences in working with controversial issues. If students lack professional experience, the lecturer can focus on reflection on personal background rather than teaching experiences. "*Handling personal and professional baggage*" is one of the fundamental steps in TCI training. Before entering the classroom, future teachers need to understand how their own views can affect their teaching. Another important decision to make is if a teacher should or wants to share personal opinions with the class<sup>5</sup>, this will affect the teaching process. Of course, *another way to deal with the lack of teacher students' experience is to help them to obtain it*. For example, the lecturer can make an emphasis on classroom scenarios prepared in advance rather than conduct long discussions. Vicarious experiences through lesson scenarios or videos of such lessons can alert students to difficult or overheated situations. After all, what matters the most in TCI practice is how the students respond.
- Do not start training on the handling of controversial issues until your learners first have *a good understanding of what is involved in organizing classroom discussion work generally*. They can learn general techniques for

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<sup>5</sup> More details on how to handle personal background and what role can a teacher take when working with TCI can be found in Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (2015). Living with Controversy: Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE). Training Pack for Teachers (pp. 15 - 21).

discussion activities by practising them on each other – using pairs, small groups and larger groups – and by reflecting upon the way they themselves are asked to participate in discussion activities as part of their training course. Building on this knowledge they can then begin to consider the factors that come into play when the topic of the discussion is more emotive and divisive, and consider more specialized techniques, such as taking a time-out, de-personalizing or distancing from the issue etc (see below how these techniques can be used when working with controversies). A good exercise that might be used to get started on this is the *Hot or Cold* one in the „Teaching Controversial Issues”<sup>6</sup> manual.

- Further, it is important to *explain to teacher students the basic rules and techniques of teaching controversial issues*. First of all, one should consider risks and challenges of the selected topic. Teacher students should have a clear understanding that even if you use the best pedagogical methods, there will be a point you can't go beyond to keep the classroom safe. Good teaching means being able to assess which topics and reactions you can handle and what you still need to learn to deal with. They should be advised that when they have the opportunity to teach controversial issues in real life they should begin with easier, less heated or less divisive ones.
- Because of its emotional aspect, a controversial issue is also personal. Some students might appear to be vulnerable, so just asking students what they think will not work. Besides, the teacher can hardly demand students to reveal their personal views in public, one could see it as a violation of privacy. It is important to *de-personalize* the issue, as well as to contextually and temporally distance the class from the issue. For example, a historical case can be offered as a main focus of discussion. A *timeout* to avoid an over-heated discussion should also be previewed. Only when the *safe environment* is assured, teacher can work on the development of a critical approach of students in relation to a controversy.
- It can be useful to *create little checklists* for this that can be learned off-by-heart as it were before entering the classroom proper. For example, when faced with a potential controversial issue, do you (a) do it straight with students swapping their own opinions? b) do it at a safer distance by bringing in a historical/ imaginary analogy to discuss? (c) do its as a collaborative research project? (d) don't do it at all and tell students why you are not? Another little checklist might be for personal baggage, e.g., do you (a) tell students what your baggage is? (b) emphasise the views contrary to your own? or (c) team-teach it with a teacher with different opinions?
- Methods of creating safe environment in the classroom are essential to learn for working with controversial issues. There is a variety of definitions of safe spaces in education. The key words are usually “respect” and “safety”. A definition that can

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<sup>6</sup> Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (2015). Living with Controversy: Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE). Training Pack for Teachers (pp. 40-42).

be given in terms of human rights and democratic citizenship education<sup>7</sup> is “a classroom atmosphere where young people feel free and able to discuss their views openly together, respecting ground rules about listening to and respecting others<sup>8</sup>”.

Teacher students need to know *how to set rules in the classroom* and assure that they are respected<sup>9</sup>. Do not forget about teaching beginning teachers the importance of ground rules, and the possibility of having special classroom rules for “when we discuss difficult issues” - which are best made jointly by the teacher and his/her students. This may be done as part of general classroom management and also in relation to discussion work. Organizing an effective dialogue in a way that *everyone is included* is another important criterion of a safe discussion. Some school students are not used to speaking long individually or in a group and they find it difficult to sustain. In this situation, it is a good strategy to start simple and build up students’ competences along the way. A teacher can plan a 5-minute discussion time to develop students’ social, communication skills and self-control. Showing to students how they can gradually achieve success is one of the elements of a safe discussion.

Here is a short overview of *the main rules on how to keep the classroom safe*:

- Establish effective ground rules together with students. Don’t forget – teacher is still a “director” of the lesson and have an important say in what happens in the classroom.
- Among the rules for any “safe discussion” are: one person speaking at a time, no personal remarks, challenging ideas and not people, no inappropriate or offensive language, sticking to the given time etc.
- When managing the discussion, encourage young people to participate and insist that they listen respectfully to one another.
- Anticipate what differences are likely to appear in the classroom and be ready to manage these.
- Use a range of teaching methods that promote the exchange of different perspectives. For some tips see, for example, manuals “Teaching Controversial Issues” (2015) and “Signposts: Teacher Training Pack” (2020).
- Share your experiences with other teachers.

While emphasizing how fundamental self-reflection and a well-developed methodical toolbox are for working with controversial issues and avoiding negative consequences, the

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<sup>7</sup> You can find more information here: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc/what-is-edc/hre>

<sup>8</sup> Bondevik, J. H., Dautaj, A., O Grady, K., & Vallianatos, A. (2020). *Signposts Teacher Training Module: Teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* (p. 51)

<sup>9</sup> More information on what “safe spaces” at school are can be found in Jackson, R. (2014). *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* (pp.46 – 57). Practical tips on how to establish safe environment in the classroom can be found in Bondevik, J. H., Dautaj, A., O Grady, K., & Vallianatos, A. (2020). *Signposts Teacher Training Module: Teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* (pp. 51 – 59). Also, see Warren, L (2000). *Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom*, available here

[https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/catl/wp-content/uploads/sites/126/2017/04/Managing-Hot-Moments-in-the-Classroom-Harvard\\_University.pdf](https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/catl/wp-content/uploads/sites/126/2017/04/Managing-Hot-Moments-in-the-Classroom-Harvard_University.pdf)

lecturer should also **explain the value of teaching controversial issues for everyday work in the classroom and for its benefits in helping students to obtain the competences they require to be informed, active and responsible citizens in democratic society.** By showing how TCI knowledge and skills make teaching easier rather than more complicated, the lecture encourages teacher students to address controversial issues rather than to avoid them.

- The lecturer can clarify and highlight the *benefits that teaching controversial issues brings to school students.* These benefits include development of necessary competences, such critical assessment of information, the ability to respectfully communicate and independently formulate their own opinions on the matter. Discussing controversial issues in the classroom helps to keep students safe through collectively established rules, prevents learners from being marginalized or attacked in over-heated discussions.
- By *setting clear timeline and realistic targets* the lecturer can demonstrate to teacher students that success requires time. Teaching controversial issues is a demanding pedagogical practice and starting with less divisive topics and shorter discussions is a suitable first step on the way of mastering that practice.
- If a controversial issue is part of the curriculum, a teacher student can be encouraged to ask for some *advice from a more experienced teacher.*
- *Referring to or demonstrating good practices* can reassure teacher students and facilitate their understanding of what a good controversial issues teaching is. There are various ready activities available in such training packs as “Teaching Controversial Issues” and “Signposts”, focused on teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews at school.
- It is also useful to *assign a follow-up task* – to plan a lesson or activity on controversial issues in terms of the school practice or conduct a short mock-lesson. When giving a lesson planning task, the lecturer can emphasize that the lesson should be adapted specifically for the local context or set a pre-defined context (geographical area, what kind of people live there, gender ratio in the class if relevant etc.)

### 3. Other resources

Since the paper was focused specifically on the particularities of working with controversial issues in the initial teacher training, the list of recommendations on how to work with TCIs offered in this paper is in no way exhaustive. There is a number of techniques, principles and methods that all teachers should take into account when preparing, implementing and assessing lessons on controversial issues. We strongly encourage to consult other resources indicated in the reading list and videos of this session that contain more information, methods to use, exercises and examples.