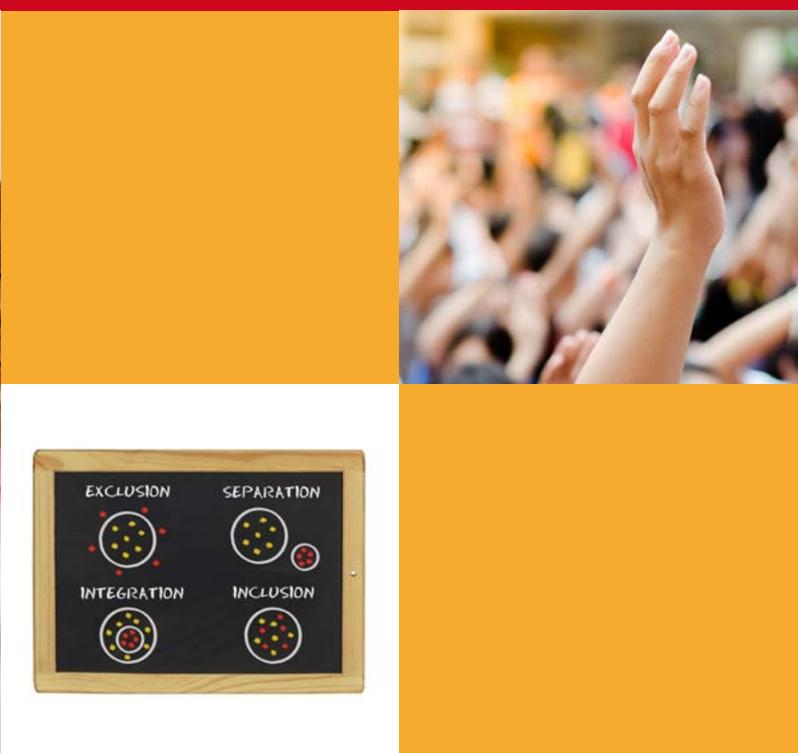


# TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES THROUGH EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND HUMAN RIGHTS



Training pack for teachers

Funded  
by the European Union  
and the Council of Europe



EUROPEAN UNION

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



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Implemented  
by the Council of Europe

# **TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES THROUGH EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

TRAINING PACK FOR TEACHERS

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# Introduction

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**T**his training pack is a professional development programme for teachers, designed to support and promote the teaching of controversial issues in schools in Europe.

## **Why is the pack needed?**

Learning how to engage in dialogue with people whose values are different from one's own and to respect them is central to the democratic process and essential for the protection and strengthening of democracy and for fostering a culture of human rights.

Yet in Europe young people do not often have an opportunity to discuss controversial issues in school because these are seen as too challenging to teach, for example in the case of issues such as extremism, gender violence, child abuse or sexual orientation. Unable to voice their concerns, unaware of how others feel, or left to rely on friends and social media for their information, young people can be frustrated or confused about some of the major issues which affect their communities and European society today. In the absence of help from school, they may have no reliable means of dealing with these issues constructively and no one to guide them.

The idea for this pack resulted from a call from policy makers and practitioners in a number of European countries for more effective training for teachers in the teaching of controversial issues.

## **Why now?**

Public concern arising in the aftermath of a number of high-profile incidents of violence and social disorder in different European countries has combined with new thinking in education for democracy and human rights to make the handling of controversial issues in schools a matter of educational urgency.

Firstly, incidents such as the 2011 London riots, the 2011 Norwegian hate crimes and the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015 have prompted a wholesale review of the part played by schools in the moral and civic development of young people in these countries and across Europe.

Secondly, European policy on education for democracy and human rights has shifted in recent years from reliance on textbook exercises and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge to an emphasis on active and participatory learning and engagement with "real-life" issues. There is a growing consensus that democratic citizenship, respect for human rights and intercultural understanding are learned more effectively through "doing" rather than "knowing", in the sense of just accumulating facts. As a result, curricula for democratic citizenship and human rights education across Europe have been opened up to new, unpredictable and controversial types of teaching content.

## **What do we mean by "controversial"?**

The definition that has proved most useful for those in European countries involved in the pilot project is that "controversial issues" may be defined as: "issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society".

They vary from the local to the global, for example from the building of mosques to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Some are long-standing, such as the sectarian divisions between communities in a number of European countries, others are very recent, for example the Islamic radicalisation of youth.

They also vary with place and time. Crucifixes in schools may be highly contentious in one country but an accepted part of life in another, as is also the case with bilingual education, paying for metered water or Islamic headscarves. Almost any topic can become controversial at any time and new controversies are arising every day.

## **Why are controversial issues challenging to teach?**

Controversial issues embody major conflicts of value and interest, often coupled with disputed claims about underlying facts. They tend to be complex with no easy answers. They arouse strong feelings and have a tendency to create or reinforce divisions between people, engendering suspicion and mistrust.

Opening up the school curriculum to issues of this kind raises difficult pedagogical questions, such as how to protect the sensitivities of students from different backgrounds and cultures, how to prevent friction in the classroom and how to teach contentious material even-handedly, avoiding criticisms of bias. It also raises questions about academic freedom and the role of the teacher's own beliefs and values.

For school leadership and management controversial issues raise questions of policy, such as how to support teachers in teaching about them, how to provide additional opportunities for dialogue within the school community (for example through democratic forms of school governance), how to promote a supportive school ethos, how to monitor the overall quality of provision and how to address the anxieties of parents and others outside the school.

## **How does the pack help?**

The training pack seeks to address the challenges of teaching controversial issues through the development of a comprehensive package of training and professional development material.

It aims to help teachers recognise the value of engaging young people in controversial issues and develop the confidence and competences to make it a part of their everyday practice, in particular through:

- ▶ the creation of "safe spaces" in the classroom where students can explore issues that concern them freely and without fear;
- ▶ the use of teaching strategies and techniques which promote open and respectful dialogue.

The pack acknowledges that while there are no "quick fixes" and not every issue will be suitable for every age group, ultimately there is no good reason why controversial issues should be avoided in schools and classrooms and every good reason why they should not.

## **How has it been developed?**

The training pack has been developed through the Human Rights and Democracy in Action Pilot Projects Scheme, jointly implemented by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. It draws for its inspiration and aims on the *Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education* (EDC/HRE), the Council of Europe Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education programme and the European Commission Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020). It also draws on the Council of Europe's work on history, intercultural and religious education, and on non-violent conflict resolution.

The pack has been scoped, designed and piloted by the pilot project and is the work of representatives from a range of different European countries. It brings together policies, practices and research literature from across Europe and beyond.

## **Who is it designed for?**

The pack is designed primarily for the benefit of classroom teachers. Controversial issues can arise in every phase of education, type of school and area of the curriculum, so the pack will be relevant to teachers across all educational settings and in all subjects, from pre-primary to tertiary, and from citizenship education and social studies to languages and science. It has been devised for use in professional development sessions and/or pre-service teacher training under the guidance of an experienced trainer or facilitator.

It will also be useful for school leaders and senior managers. Controversial issues cannot be restricted to classrooms; they invariably spill out into other areas of the school – corridors, cafeterias, playgrounds and staff rooms.

The pack is not country-specific and is suitable for use on a Europe-wide basis.

### **What sort of approach does it take?**

The pack promotes an open and collaborative approach to teaching and learning, with a special emphasis on self-reflection and thoughtful, informed action. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on the way their personal beliefs and values affect their professional attitudes towards and handling of contentious material.

The professional competences around which the pack is constructed are rooted in the core values and goals of the Council of Europe and fall into three categories:

- ▶ personal, e.g. self-reflection;
- ▶ theoretical, e.g. understanding the role of dialogue in democracy;
- ▶ practical, e.g. teaching and learning strategies.

### **How is it structured?**

The training pack is composed of two main parts:

- ▶ Part A – the “Scoping paper”;
- ▶ Part B – the “Programme of training activities”.

Drawing on a review of published sources from a number of countries in Europe and beyond and using evidence from research and initial piloting by the pilot project, the “Scoping paper” examines the major challenges of teaching controversial issues, suggests ways in which these challenges may be met, identifies the professional competences required to meet them and makes recommendations for the development of a set of training activities based on these competences. The training activities themselves are set out with full instructions in the “Programme of training activities” which follows.

### **How should it be used?**

Ideally, the pack should be used in its entirety. The two parts are interrelated and designed to build upon and reinforce each other. However, this is not absolutely essential and the pack is sufficiently flexible to be implemented in different ways.

The “Scoping paper” provides the rationale for teaching controversial issues and explains why the training activities have been chosen. It can be read before, during or after the training activities, or a combination of all three.

The “Programme of training activities” is designed to form a continuous course of practical training of about two days in length, though it could easily be divided up into shorter sessions held over a number of days. Individual activities could also be used as stand-alone sessions if required.

### **How does the pack relate to current educational priorities and imperatives?**

The content, approach and flexibility of the pack make it well-suited to contribute to multiple current educational priorities and imperatives. In particular, it helps to strengthen the role of education in promoting the core values of the Council of Europe – democracy, human rights and the rule of law – and the concept of education as a bulwark against social evils such as extremism and the radicalisation of youth, xenophobia and discrimination, violence and hate-speech, loss of faith in politics and politicians.



## **PART A**

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# Scoping paper – Exploring the challenges and developing competence

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## Introduction

### **Purpose**

Learning how to engage in dialogue with people whose values are different from one's own and to respect them is central to the democratic process and essential for the protection and strengthening of democracy and for fostering a culture of human rights.

Yet in Europe young people do not often have an opportunity to discuss controversial issues in school because they are seen as too challenging to teach, for example in the case of issues such as extremism, gender violence, child abuse or sexual orientation. Unable to voice their concerns, unaware of how others feel or left to rely on friends and social media for their information, young people can be frustrated or confused about some of the major issues which affect their communities and European society today. In the absence of help from school, they might have no reliable means of dealing with these issues constructively and no one to guide them.

This "Scoping paper" examines the major challenges of teaching controversial issues in European schools and suggests ways in which these challenges may be met. It focuses in particular on the need to increase the confidence and competences of teachers in addressing controversial issues in their classrooms and across their schools.

These suggestions form the basis of a series of recommendations for the development of a new training pack on the teaching of controversial issues, comprising the "Scoping paper" (Part A) and a "Programme of training activities" (Part B). These are intended to be accessible and have application across Europe and have already been successfully piloted with teachers, trainers and facilitators in a number of European countries.

### **Approach**

The "Scoping paper" promotes an open and collaborative approach to teaching and learning, with a special emphasis on self-reflection and thoughtful action. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on the way their personal beliefs and values affect their professional attitude towards and practice in the handling of contentious material.

It also emphasises the creation of "safe environments" in classrooms and schools where controversial issues can be discussed and debated openly by students, supported and facilitated by teachers. Such environments help students to deal with differences, defuse tension and encourage non-violent means of conflict resolution. They encourage self-reflection and listening to others, promote intercultural dialogue, give minorities a voice, build mutual tolerance and respect, and foster a more critical approach to information received from the media.

## The context

Public concern arising in the aftermath of a number of high-profile incidents of violence and social disorder in different European countries has combined with new thinking in education for democracy and human rights to make the handling of controversial issues in schools a matter of educational urgency.

Firstly, incidents such as the 2011 London riots, the 2011 Norway hate crimes and the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015 have prompted a wholesale review of the part played by schools in the moral and civic development of young people, an imperative which has been echoed across Europe.

Secondly, European policy on education for democracy and human rights has shifted from reliance on textbook exercises and theoretical knowledge to an emphasis on active and participatory learning and engagement with “real-life” issues. There is a growing consensus that democratic citizenship, respect for human rights and intercultural understanding are learned more effectively through “doing” than accumulating facts – just “knowing”. Accordingly, curricula for democratic citizenship and human rights education across Europe have been opened up to new, unpredictable and controversial types of teaching content.

Opening up the curriculum to controversial issues raises difficult pedagogical questions for teachers, including:

- ▶ how to respond to conflicting truth claims among students, including whether to take sides on an issue – so that the teacher does not feel compromised or the students feel like there is a “hidden agenda”;
- ▶ how to protect the sensitivities of students from different backgrounds and cultures and of those with a personal or family involvement in the topic – so that students do not feel embarrassed, victimised or alienated, or are subject to harassment or bullying;
- ▶ how to defuse tension and prevent discussions from overheating – so that classroom control is maintained and students are able to discuss freely;
- ▶ how to encourage students to listen to other people’s points of view – so that students learn to respect each other and to appreciate different opinions;
- ▶ how to handle controversial issues even-handedly without detailed background knowledge or trustworthy sources of evidence on a topic – so that teachers do not feel compromised or vulnerable to criticisms of partiality or incompetence;
- ▶ how to respond to unexpected questions about controversial issues and deal with insensitive remarks – so that the teacher’s integrity is maintained and students do not feel hurt or offended.

It also raises difficult questions for school policy, such as:

- ▶ how school leadership can support classroom teachers in their teaching of controversial issues;
- ▶ how to manage the spreading of discussion about controversial issues from the classroom out into the corridors, playground or other spaces;
- ▶ how to develop and promote a supportive democratic school culture across the school;
- ▶ how to address the anxieties of parents and others in the community or in the media who have concerns about the appropriateness of teaching such issues in school and/or of the ways in which these are taught.

The following section looks at different responses to these questions found in the growing literature in this field, focusing, in particular, on what the literature has to say about:

- ▶ what makes an issue “controversial”;
- ▶ arguments for teaching controversial issues;
- ▶ the challenges of teaching about controversial issues;
- ▶ how these challenges may be met;
- ▶ the quality and availability of professional training.

## **Literature review**

Over the last three or four decades there has been a slow but steady growth in literature advocating for the teaching of controversial issues in democratic citizenship and human rights education, while at the same time highlighting the considerable challenges teachers face when handling such issues in the classroom. This literature includes authored and edited volumes (e.g. Berg et al., 2003; Claire and Holden, 2007; Cowan and Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Stradling et al., 1984), journal articles (e.g. Ashton and Watson, 1998; Clarke, 1992; Dearden, 1981; Kelly, 1986; Soley, 1996; Wilkins, 2003) and a range of practical guidelines and online resources for teachers (e.g. CitizED, 2004; Citizenship Foundation, 2004; Clarke, 2001; Crombie and Rowe, 2009; CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012; Fiehn, 2005; Huddleston and Kerr, 2006; Learning and Skills Network, 2006; Oxfam, 2006; Richardson, 2011).

The contributors to these publications all agree that the teaching of controversial issues has an important part to play in the preparation of young citizens for participation in society, not least because it helps them to learn how to engage in democratic dialogue with those whose views differ from their own. The development of

student discussion skills, in particular in relation to “sensitive, controversial issues” is identified as an important teacher competence in the Council of Europe tool on teacher competences for EDC/HRE (Brett et al., 2009).

There is also recognition that teacher competence in developing students’ analytical and critical thinking skills, for example in source evaluation and the recognition of bias, and in encouraging language development, is important in addressing controversial issues. The quality of discussion of controversial issues in classrooms and schools is inextricably tied to the quality of students’ language development (written, oral and aural). The more developed a student’s language skills are, the easier it is for them to identify and marshal information from a variety of sources, use information to construct clear and sharp points and put these forward calmly and eloquently in discussion with others. If language skills are less developed, students are more likely to be overwhelmed by an issue and to flounder in a sea of opinion, that can leave them resorting to hectoring and aggressive language as they see they are losing the argument.

## What are controversial issues?

The term “controversial issue” is used in different ways in different places. However, the differences tend not to be significant; they seem to represent different variations on the same general set of themes rather than radically different underlying conceptions.

The definition that has proved most useful across European countries involved in this pilot project is that “controversial issues” may be defined as: “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society”.

Typically, controversial issues are described as disputes or problems which are topical, arouse strong emotions, generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative beliefs or values and/or competing interests, and which, as a result, have a tendency to divide society. Such issues are often highly complex and cannot be settled simply by appealing to evidence.

However, it is the potential of controversial issues to arouse strong emotions, both inside and outside the classroom, which is often regarded as the greatest obstacle to teaching about them. For many commentators the defining characteristic of a controversial issue is its “political sensitivity”. By this, it is meant its tendency to arouse public suspicion, anger or concern – among students, parents, school officials, religious and community leaders, public authorities or even among teachers themselves (Stradling et al., 1984: 2).

It can be useful to distinguish two types of controversial issues: long-standing issues, such as the sectarian divisions and tensions between differing groups in a number of European countries, and very recent issues, such as the growing concern about religious extremism, violence and the indoctrination and radicalisation of young Europeans, or the rise of cyberbullying and online identity theft. Both types offer similar challenges to teachers, but with differing emphases. With long-standing issues the challenge for teachers is how to come afresh to the issue and find something new to say, while avoiding further alienating particular groups or individuals. With very recent issues the challenge is how to respond to spontaneous discussion by students, how to find reliable information on the topic and the position the teacher should take on it.

Attitudes change and circumstances vary, so what is regarded as controversial at one point in time may seem relatively innocuous at another, and what is controversial in one place may not be elsewhere. The idea of state-funded health care is particularly controversial in the USA, for example, but hardly so in many European countries (Hess, 2009). Meanwhile, issues of sexual orientation and religious difference are addressed more explicitly in the curriculum in some European countries than in others. Similarly, what is considered controversial in the context of one school, or even of one class, may be of no concern in the context of another (Stradling et al., 1984).

It is perhaps for this reason that little or no attempt seems to have been made to categorise controversial issues into different types. An exception is Stradling et al. (1984) who offer a typology based on whether a dispute is about:

- ▶ what has happened
- ▶ the causes of the present situation
- ▶ the desirable ends to work towards
- ▶ the appropriate course of action to be taken
- ▶ the likely effects of that action (ibid.: 2-3).

Stradling et al. (1984) also draw a distinction between issues which are superficially controversial and those that are inherently controversial. The former, in principle at least, can be solved by appealing to evidence.

The latter derive from disagreements based on matters of fundamental belief or value judgment and are much more intractable (ibid.: 2).

## Why teach controversial issues?

Stradling et al. (1984) divide justifications for the teaching of controversial issues into two types: “product-” and “process-based”.

### a. Product-based justifications

In product-based justifications issues are seen as important in themselves, either because they relate to the “major social, political, economic or moral problems of our time”, or they are “directly relevant to students’ lives” (ibid.: 3). This is one of the major reasons for teaching controversial issues given in the Crick Report (Crick, 1998) in the UK: “Controversial issues are important in themselves and to omit informing about them and discussing them is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people” (Crick, 1998: 38).

A slightly different argument is that it is important not only to teach controversial issues because the learning will be valuable in its own right, but also to compensate for the one-sided and confusing ways in which some issues are presented in the media. Thus Scarratt and Davison (2012) observe: “The evolution of mass media has increasingly exposed children to sensitive issues, which require demystification and discussion” (Scarratt and Davison, 2012: 38). The proliferation of media sources and outlets and the ease with which students can access them from a young age means that this argument may be even more pertinent today than in 2007 when it was first commented on by Scarratt and Davison (2012).

### b. Process-based justifications

In process-based reasoning the substance of controversial issues is seen as less important than the learning of competences, civic attitudes and behaviour which can be engendered by engaging with them. These include:

- ▶ subject-related – e.g. understanding that controversy is not to be feared but part of life in a democracy, the ability to discuss contentious issues in civil and productive ways, strategies for engaging in such discussions, realising that one’s views matter as do all in a democracy (Hess, 2009: 162);
- ▶ cross-curricular – e.g. language and communication skills, confidence and interpersonal skills (Claire and Holden, 2007), higher-order dialogic and thinking skills (Wegerif, 2003), information-processing, reasoning, enquiry, creative thinking and evaluation skills (Lambert and Balderstone, 2010: 142);
- ▶ civic behaviour – greater political interest (Soley, 1996), pro-democratic values, increased political engagement (Hess, 2009: 31), more civic knowledge, greater interest in discussing public affairs out of school, more likely to say they will vote and volunteer as adults (Civic Mission of Schools Report, quoted in Hess, 2009: 28).

## What are the challenges?

The challenges of teaching controversial issues come under five broad headings.

- a. Teaching style
- b. Protecting student sensitivities
- c. Classroom climate and control
- d. Lack of expert knowledge
- e. Dealing with spontaneous questions and remarks

### a. Teaching style

Teaching a controversial issue is different from initiating students into an agreed body of knowledge. There is no standing outside a controversial issue and approaching it with the academic distance that may be appropriate elsewhere. The teaching and learning process is always influenced by the attitudes and opinions teachers and students bring to the classroom; it can never be neutral as such (Stradling et al., 1984).

For this reason, the risk of bias has been seen as one of the major problems of teaching controversial issues (e.g. Crick, 1998; Oxfam, 2006; PSHE Association, 2013). In some instances, it is not just the risk of bias but

anxieties about allegations of bias that are seen as the problem. These anxieties are said to be exaggerated by the culture of accountability characteristic of some contemporary educational systems (Clarke, 2001). As Hess (2009) points out, though such anxieties are often without foundation, some have proved to be entirely justified. She quotes the example of New York teachers who have been disciplined and, in some cases, fired for addressing 9/11 as a controversial issue (Hess, 2009: 25). More recently, in the United Kingdom, the schools inspectorate (Ofsted) has held some schools accountable for not doing more to stop students accessing sites about Islamic extremism while at school or prevent them sharing the information with other students via social media. This has led Ofsted to downgrade the inspection ratings given to some of these schools from “outstanding” to “inadequate” because of concerns about the schools’ ability to safeguard students.<sup>1</sup>

There is much discussion in the literature about the sort of teaching style which will minimise the risk of bias and/or allegations of bias when introducing controversial issues. Of prime significance is how teachers deal with their own experiences and opinions, and, in particular, whether or not they choose to share them with their students. Linked to this is the question of how teachers deal with students’ experiences and opinions, particularly where students and/or their families may be directly or indirectly involved in a controversial issue.

Stradling et al. identified four relevant teaching styles (Stradling et al., 1984: 112-113), subsequently reproduced with variations in a number of publications (e.g. Crick, 1998; Fiehn, 2005). These are:

- ▶ “Neutral chairperson” approach – This requires the teacher not to express any personal views or allegiances whatsoever, but to act only as a facilitator of discussion. While this may help to reduce the chance of undue teacher influence, it can be difficult to sustain, especially when ill-informed views are being expressed, and may sometimes have the effect of reinforcing existing attitudes and prejudice. Some also maintain it can cast doubt on a teacher’s credibility with the class.
- ▶ “Balanced” approach – This requires the teacher to present students with a wide range of alternative views on an issue, as persuasively as possible, without revealing their own view. While this has the advantages of showing that issues are not two dimensional and introducing ideas and arguments which students would not otherwise arrive at, it can also give the impression that all opinions are equally sound and grounded in the evidence. It may also mean allowing the expression of some very extreme positions which may do no more than reinforce existing prejudices.
- ▶ “Devil’s advocate” approach – This requires the teacher to consciously take up the opposite position to the one expressed by students. While this has the advantage of ensuring a range of viewpoints are expressed and taken seriously, students may mistakenly identify the teacher with some of the views thus expressed. If particular positions are argued for too well it may also reinforce existing prejudices.
- ▶ “Stated commitment” approach – This requires teachers to make their own views known at some point in the exploration of an issue. While this helps students to become aware of and take account of the teacher’s prejudices and biases and gives them a model of how to respond to a controversial issue, it may also lead them into accepting a view simply because it is their teacher’s.
- ▶ “Ally” approach – This requires the teacher to take the side of a student or a group of students. While this can help weaker students or marginalised groups to have a voice and show them how arguments may be built on and developed, it can also give other students the impression that the teacher is simply using it to promote their own view, or be seen as favouritism.
- ▶ “Official line” approach – This requires the teacher to promote the side dictated by public authorities. While this can give the teaching official legitimacy and protect the teacher from recriminations from the authorities, if the teacher has a different view they may feel compromised and it may lead students to think that their own discussions are irrelevant because there is only one view that counts.

## **b. Protecting student sensitivities**

Another problem or challenge is the risk of controversial issues impacting negatively on students’ emotions or self-esteem.

It is argued that the effect of allowing students the freedom to say what they think about an issue is that teachers give the “official” seal of approval to the expression of a whole range of extreme views and attitudes. This is likely to lead to other students feeling offended, harassed or marginalised, causing hostilities and divisions, either within or outside the classroom (Crombie and Rowe, 2009).

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1. See for example the article in *The Guardian* newspaper on 20 November 2014 at [www.theguardian.com/education/2014/nov/20/church-england-school-john-cass-ofsted-downgraded-extremism](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/nov/20/church-england-school-john-cass-ofsted-downgraded-extremism).

Philpott et al. (2013) found that the negativity of students towards their peers when discussing different points of view was a major concern of teachers. Teachers in the study reported that students often became emotional and felt attacked when they perceived comments made by classmates as personally offensive. This was found to be especially so in discussions relating to religion and intercultural issues.

Students sometimes also feel under attack from the teacher, either on account of the inclusion of subject matter which they perceive as portraying them in a bad light, or through the branding of their sincerely held opinions as inappropriate or “politically incorrect”. Philpott et al. (2013) recorded a teacher’s account of a student who refused to take part in a discussion on Islam because she felt the teacher was “out to get her religion”. This is a growing challenge in many European countries where communities and schools, particularly in large cities, have a more multicultural and multifaith population because of the movement of people and families into and out of the country.

The danger in these situations is that it can lead to students practising self-censorship or even withdrawing from the learning process altogether – whether through intimidation and bullying, fear of being branded “politically incorrect” or simply ostracism by their peers (Crombie and Rowe, 2009).

### **c. Classroom climate and control**

A third problem or challenge when teaching controversial issues is that of classroom climate and control and the fear of discussion “overheating”. Where strong emotions are involved, classes can easily become polarised, causing hostility between students which threatens classroom climate and discipline. There is a fear that conflict between students might at any time get out of hand, undermining the teacher’s authority and impacting negatively on future student-teacher relations. There is also fear, in some instances, that it could damage the professional and personal standing of teachers. For example, if a teacher loses control of the discussion, this is quite likely to undermine the authority of the teacher with that class of students in the future. In extreme circumstances, it could lead to complaints being made about the teacher by students, or by parents and community representatives, triggering an enquiry by government officials and the teacher either being publicly censured or losing their job.

The challenge of classroom climate and control is a particular issue for those training to be teachers and/or in the early years of their teaching, hence the emphasis in guides on the teaching of controversial issues on the need for strategies to help defuse confrontation in the classroom and prevent discussions from becoming too heated and spilling out beyond the classroom (e.g. CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012).

The problem of class control appears to be most acute in the case of handling discussion work with students. This is unsurprising since managing discussion can be particularly difficult for teachers at the best of times. It requires high-order skills, careful preparation and continuous reflective practice, and the capability to respond flexibly and think on one’s feet (Huddleston and Rowe, 2015).

Mentioned less frequently than the fear of discussions getting out of hand, but just as important, is the risk of discussions not taking off at all or underheating. Stradling et al. (1984) observe that even with issues that divide the rest of the nation, teachers may find themselves confronted by a wall of apathy. This can be a particular challenge when addressing long-standing controversial issues where the various opinions and positions are well known and so well rehearsed that they do not spark students’ interest. How to respond to unquestioning consensus or apathy is therefore another challenge facing teachers (Stradling et al., 1984: 11).

### **d. Lack of expert knowledge**

The problems of teaching controversial issues often seem to be compounded by the complexity and dynamic nature of many of these issues. They make demands on teacher knowledge not usually experienced in other areas of the curriculum. It has been said that properly grasping the complexity of some of these issues would require “at least some knowledge of the economic, sociological, political, historical and psychological factors involved” (ibid.: 3). This is a particular challenge where controversial issues are very recent. Being current, such issues are in a state of constant flux, such that it is difficult for teachers to get a proper grasp of or keep up to date with them, or predict their eventual outcomes. They are so contemporary, say Stradling et al. (1984), that it is “difficult to obtain teaching materials which deal with these disputes adequately or in a suitably balanced way” and the sources of information with which teachers have to work are likely to be “biased, incomplete and contradictory” (ibid.: 4). This is a particular challenge now with the plethora of media outlets and social networking sites reporting and commenting on issues often in “real-time”.

Clarke (2001) notes that it is not just the complexity, but the lack of familiarity with the topic that tends to discourage teachers, for example when a new human rights issue suddenly emerges in a distant part of the world, or tackling the intricacies of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for an urban teacher working in a rural school, or dealing with the issue of Islamic extremism for a teacher working in a monocultural school in a small town. This can be disconcerting for teachers who are used to playing the role of subject “expert” and being looked up to by students because of their knowledge and expertise.

### **e. Dealing with spontaneous questions and remarks**

Finally, there is the problem of knowing how best to respond to spontaneous remarks or questions of a controversial nature made by the students. With students having constant access to the internet and social media on their mobile phones and laptops, it is impossible to predict what issues they will bring up next, when they will bring them up or what impact it will have on other students or the atmosphere in the classroom or the school. Teachers in the 2013 study by Philpott et al. referred to this as one of the major challenges facing teachers in this field.

### **How can these challenges be met?**

It is generally understood that there is no one simple response to the challenges associated with the teaching of controversial issues. Thus, for example, Stradling et al. say:

It simply is not possible to lay down hard-and-fast rules about teaching controversial subject matter to be applied at all times. The teacher has to take account of the knowledge, values and experiences which the students bring with them into the classroom; the teaching methods which predominate in other lessons; the classroom climate ... and the age and ability of the students (Stradling et al., 1984: 11).

Since different circumstances in the classroom require different methods and strategies and there is no guarantee that a strategy which works with one set of students will necessarily work with another group, what is needed, it is argued, is sensitivity to context and flexibility of response.

A number of different practical suggestions drawn from the literature are offered as to what this might mean in practice. They relate to issues such as:

- ▶ teacher personal awareness and self-reflection;
- ▶ awareness of the nature of controversial issues and the challenges they pose;
- ▶ awareness of the make-up of the class and school environment;
- ▶ ability to use and apply a range of teaching styles;
- ▶ creation of an appropriate classroom atmosphere and supporting democratic school culture;
- ▶ introducing students to frameworks and strategies;
- ▶ eschewing the role of “knowledgeable expert”;
- ▶ training students to identify bias;
- ▶ ability to plan and manage discussion effectively;
- ▶ ability to use and apply a range of specialised teaching strategies;
- ▶ involving other stakeholders and teachers.

Each of these practical suggestions is now examined in turn.

### **a. Teacher personal awareness and self-reflection**

Teachers should be aware of and sensitive to the way their own experience of issues is likely to affect the way they deal with them in the classroom. An element of personal self-reflection by teachers on their own beliefs and values, and how these influence the way they address and interact with students both individually and collectively, is seen as crucial to the sensitive teaching of controversial subject matter. An important part of this process is deciding how to balance the personal and the public spheres. While there may be some views on issues that teachers wish to remain private from their students, there can also be a place for teachers sometimes sharing their personal experiences. Sharing can add to the evidence on a topic, aid student understanding and deepen their perspective. So, for example, a teacher who has been a victim of cyberbullying may decide to share their personal experiences with students so that they can better understand its impact and effects, without going into precise private details of the nature of the bullying.

## **b. Awareness of the nature of controversial issues and the challenges they pose**

Understanding what it means for issues to be controversial, the problems of teaching them and realistic expectations of what might be achieved in the classroom are also seen as important. Guidance and training material typically makes general understanding of the nature of controversial issues, the benefits of including them in the curriculum and the potential hazards to watch out for a preliminary to the consideration of specific teaching approaches and strategies. The trialling of the pilot materials for this teaching pack gave a clearer understanding of which issues are controversial across a range of European countries compared to those that are more controversial in specific countries. For example, issues about gender equality, health and sex education, and racism were deemed controversial in the majority of pilot countries while the issue of the corruption of public officials was particularly contentious in Albania, the issue of policy toward EU migration was controversial in the UK, and of whether people should be metered for the water they use was a hot issue in the Republic of Ireland.

## **c. Awareness of the make-up of the class and school environment**

Having a working knowledge of the range of potential sensitivities in each class, as well as in the school as a whole and the surrounding community, and also, potentially, the stance of official authorities, is seen as a prerequisite for understanding when an issue is likely to be controversial and how it might be dealt with sensitively. In her research on classroom diversity, Hess (2009) found there was more variance in students' own views (intra-diversity) and across students (inter-diversity) than one might first imagine.

The pilot phase in the development of this training pack emphasised the importance of countries using this contextual knowledge to shape training activities around issues which are controversial in their context. For example, in the UK one of the challenges discussed by teachers during the training was how to handle the issue of the hostile reaction of some political parties toward immigration, particularly when fuelled by inflammatory media reporting; in Spain one of the issues was the high unemployment rate among young people as a result of the economic recession; in Albania the issue of tax evasion was highlighted; and in Cyprus and in the Republic of Ireland an important issue was how to handle conflicting attitudes in society toward sex and health education.

## **d. Ability to use and apply a range of teaching styles**

The ability to use a range of general teaching approaches and to know when and how to apply them in practice is regarded as particularly important, both as a way of minimising the danger of bias and of opening up students to the possibility of new ideas and values. Teachers need to become familiar with the relevant approaches, their respective advantages and disadvantages, and the circumstances in which they are best applied. The four approaches suggested by Stradling et al. (1984) – “neutral chairperson”, “balanced” approach, “devil’s advocate” and “stated commitment” – recur in numerous subsequent publications in a range of permutations. Two others have been suggested recently: the “ally” and “official line” approach. It is also suggested that it is helpful for teachers to share with students the methods being used and the motives for their choice (Crombie and Rowe, 2009: 9).

## **e. Creation of an appropriate classroom atmosphere and supporting democratic school culture**

The importance of the role of classroom and whole-school atmosphere – what is often termed “democratic school culture” – is emphasised throughout the literature. It should be an atmosphere which is “open and non-judgmental” (ibid.: 8), in which there is “honesty and trust between staff and learners” (ACT, 2013: 20) and where “students are free from any fear of expressing reasonable points of view which contradict those held either by their class teacher or by their peers” (Crick, 1998: 10.9). The establishing of codes of conduct or classroom/school rules for how students should behave when there is disagreement over an issue is regarded as the key to the creation of this kind of atmosphere, frequently conceived in terms of “ground rules” for discussion (e.g. ACT, 2013). It is often suggested that these work best when students themselves are involved in their development, they are clearly displayed for all to see and that they are regarded as a work in progress, re-visited and revised intermittently (e.g. Crombie and Rowe, 2009).

## **f. Introducing students to frameworks and strategies**

In addition to creating the right atmosphere, it has also been suggested that students should be accustomed not only to the rules of democratic discourse, but also to the sort of analytical approach that is required when

faced with issues that are controversial. This includes introducing students to the “concept of democracy” and “the fact that different individuals and groups fundamentally disagree about the kind of society they want” (ibid.: 20), and providing them with a “conceptual framework” which will help them analyse public disagreements (Stradling et al., 1984: 5) and recognise “the need for tolerance and the will to resolve disputes through discussion and debate (and ultimately the ballot box) and not through violence” (Crombie and Rowe, 2009: 8). It also included giving them “strategies for engaging” in discussion (Hess, 2009: 62).

### **g. Eschewing the role of “knowledgeable expert”**

The complex and fluid nature of many controversial issues has led to the suggestion that, in some cases at least, teachers should eschew the role of “knowledgeable experts” and opt instead for teaching through some form of enquiry- or problem-based learning (Stradling et al., 1984: 4). The role of the teacher would be more of a facilitator, merely to prompt student enquiry and debate, “scaffolding” their interactions as they ask questions of each other and on the issue by introducing relevant material, ideas and arguments when required. Clarke (2001), for example, offers a strategy for teaching controversial public issues based on four steps or elements, each of which provides students with a set of questions giving them a number of ways of looking at an issue as well as a sound basis for making a judgment on it. These are: “What is the issue about?”, “What are the arguments?”, “What is assumed?” and “How are the arguments manipulated?” Stradling et al. (1984: 115-116) identifies a set of four “process skills” and “ways of looking at issues” which students themselves can transfer from one issue to another: “critically diagnosing information and evidence”; “asking awkward questions”; “recognising rhetoric”; and “cultivating tentativeness”.

### **h. Training students to identify bias**

Some publications emphasise the benefits of teaching or training students to identify bias, both to help them analyse issues more critically and to minimise actual bias or allegations of bias (e.g. Crick, 1998). Crombie and Rowe (2009), for example, suggest encouraging students to become “bias busters”, learning to distinguish opinion from fact and spotting emotive language and hearsay in media sources.

### **i. Ability to plan and manage discussion effectively**

Recognising that classroom discussion is the main method of dealing with controversial issues for many teachers, there is a strong emphasis in the literature on teachers’ competences for planning and managing discussions. This includes allocating “substantial time” beforehand to “identify and research the background” of an issue (Claire and Holden, 2007); not using debate as a way of looking into a topic, but as the finale of a series of idea-generating activities for students, such as role play, drama or simulations (Stradling et al., 1984); framing questions, selecting a stimulus and designing tasks to engage with a stimulus (Huddleston and Rowe, 2015); and techniques for controlling discussions which are overheating, for example calling “time out” (Crombie and Rowe, 2009: 10).

A number of publications suggest using structured formats as an aid to controlling discussion. Hess (2009), for example, has investigated the pros and cons of three different formats: “town meeting”, “seminar” and “public issues discussion” approaches. Crombie and Rowe (2009: 10) recommend the training of students in discussion and debate work from the beginning and counsel that they should not be expected to discuss “seriously contentious” issues before they have been trained in the basic techniques with “safer” topics.

### **j. Ability to use and apply a range of specialised teaching strategies**

In addition to the general approaches or teaching styles which a teacher may adopt when teaching controversial subject matter, a number of more specialised teaching strategies are advocated in the literature. These strategies are designed for use with specific problems, such as: highly emotional discussions, polarisation of opinion, expressions of extreme prejudice, unquestioning consensus, apathy and so on. Stradling et al. (1984) identify four such “procedures” which are repeated and built on in various subsequent publications (e.g. Fiehn, 2005; ACT, 2013):

- ▶ distancing – introducing analogies and parallels (geographical, historical or imaginary) when an issue is highly sensitive within the class, school or local community;
- ▶ compensatory – introducing new information, ideas or arguments when students are expressing strongly held views based on ignorance, the minority is being bullied by the majority or there is an unquestioning consensus;

- ▶ empathetic – introducing activities to help students see an issue from someone else’s perspective, particularly when it involves groups which are unpopular with some or all of the students, the issue includes prejudice or discrimination against a particular group or an issue which is remote from students’ lives;
- ▶ exploratory – introducing enquiry-based or problem-solving activities when an issue is not well-defined or particularly complex.

Two additional strategies which have been advocated more recently are:

- ▶ de-personalising – introducing society- rather than person-orientated language when presenting an issue, e.g. substituting “us”, “our”, “someone”, or “society” for “you” or “your” when addressing students, especially when some or all students have a personal connection with an issue and feel particularly sensitive about it (e.g. CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit);
- ▶ engaging – introducing personally relevant or otherwise highly engaging material or activities when students are apathetic and express no opinions or feelings about an issue (Fiehn, 2005).

### **k. Involving other stakeholders and teachers**

On the whole, the literature has little to say about initiatives beyond the classroom itself. However, there are exceptions. Stradling et al. (1984) float the idea of team-teaching as a way of dealing with particularly complex issues. The suggestion is that different teachers could work on different aspects of a topic. Claire and Holden (2007) suggest that the teaching of controversial subject matter is more effective when it is shared and recommend co-operation between staff, students and parents. There is also a suggestion in the literature of bringing in outside speakers and/or organisations with experience of particular controversial issues who can talk to students at first hand.

### **What types of training and training resources are currently available?**

There has been a quiet trickle of publications on EDC/HRE dealing with the teaching of controversial issues, designed, in part at least, with teachers in mind. These include general introductions to democracy and human rights education with a special section on controversial issues (e.g. ACT, 2013; Huddleston and Kerr, 2009; Wales and Clarke, 2005) and publications dedicated specially to the topic (e.g. Claire, 2001; Citizenship Foundation, 2004; Hess, 2009). They also include a small number of teacher-training resources designed either for self-use (e.g. ACT, 2014; CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012; Clarke, 2001) or for use by facilitators or trainers (e.g. Fiehn, 2005). However, few of these publications seem to be widely known or have been used beyond their country of origin – largely the USA, the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

The small amount of empirical research that exists points to a fairly common perception among teachers that training for the teaching of controversial issues is either inadequate or non-existent. Oulton et al. (2004) reported that “the vast majority” of 200 primary and secondary teachers interviewed in England felt they had inadequate training and insufficient guidance for teaching controversial issues, either from the National Curriculum or their schools. Philpott et al. (2013) found that teachers in the USA said that neither their teacher education programmes nor their schools had prepared them adequately to teach controversial issues. One said that teaching controversial issues was “almost like groping in the dark”. All felt that more training should be provided.

### **Conclusions**

It is clear from the literature that the potential benefits of teaching controversial issues are significant and wide-ranging, and that the inclusion of controversial subject matter is important for effective EDC/HRE in modern society in Europe and beyond.

It is also clear that introducing issues about which people have strong opinions poses particular problems or challenges, both for teachers and for schools as a whole. There are anxieties about the effects of introducing such issues to students, parents and other stakeholders; about the risk of bias or undue teacher influence; about the complexity and fluidity of the subject matter; and about the patchy and partial nature of the primary resources available to teachers. As a result, important issues are often left ignored in schools and teachers’ expertise in dealing with controversial subject matter remains relatively underdeveloped.

It is generally agreed that there is no one solution which will answer all these anxieties, but that each must be addressed individually. A number of suggested teaching methods have been identified in response – both global approaches on how to deal with controversial issues in general and individual strategies for use in particular situations.

These methods have important implications for professional development. Currently, however, the opportunities for teachers to receive training in this area are extremely limited in both pre- and in-service training. Training material is also limited. A small number of training resources have been produced, mainly in the UK, Ireland and the USA. While these resources are in themselves extremely useful and indicative of what might be achieved, they are not widely known or used outside their countries of origin. Nor is it obvious how easily they could translate into different contexts. For one thing, they seem to presuppose a learning culture in which open-ended discussion and debate is already the norm. This is not necessarily the case everywhere in Europe. The persistence of traditional teacher-directed forms of education and a learning culture which prohibits the expression of contrary opinions and arguments constitutes a further level of challenge for the teaching of controversial issues, one which is hardly touched upon in the general literature. That said, the review of literature has revealed how the training resources which already exist provide a rich source of ideas and activities to draw on in developing a wider European perspective on training to teach controversial issues.

There are a number of other issues which seem not to have been properly resolved or given sufficient emphasis in the literature. Firstly, there appears to be little consideration of how controversial issues might be introduced into the curriculum in systematic or developmentally sequenced ways. Nor does much thought seem to have been given to ways in which students may be trained to recognise controversial issues for themselves. While emphasis is put on the need for teachers to understand what a controversial issue “is” and how it should be dealt with in school, very little is put on the related need of students to understand the same concept – with the possible exception of Stradling et al. (1984). To use the language of the Council of Europe’s EDC/HRE programme, while teaching “through” and “for” controversial issues is dealt with in some detail, the idea of teaching “about” controversial issues is hardly touched upon. Establishing the idea of controversial issues as an abstract concept would not only help students to recognise these issues in reality and know how they should respond to them, but would also have the effect of de-personalising these issues, rendering them safer to teach.

Secondly, although the problem of spontaneous questions and remarks of a controversial nature is frequently raised, there is little concrete advice available for teachers which they might apply in different situations.

Thirdly, the same could also be said of the question of whether or not teachers should disclose their own opinions to students. The pros and cons of this seem to be finely balanced. As a result, teachers are often left “hanging in the air” with no definite policy direction or strategy for action.

Fourthly, with the exception of occasional suggestions of involving other teachers, parents or community members, little attention is paid in the literature to the development of whole-school approaches to the teaching of controversial issues, nor is much thought given to the role of school leaders in this or to the ways they can support teachers in the classroom.

Fifthly, the question of teachers having sufficient knowledge and understanding of issues to handle them effectively in the classroom is often raised but there is little in the way of suggestions as to how teachers should go ahead and develop such a knowledge base on current and topical issues. While this training pack does not provide factual information on a range of controversial issues that may be covered in European countries, it does offer suggestions in the training activities for how teachers can build such knowledge through team-teaching and/or the use of external experts.

Finally, there appears to have been no systematic attempt to identify and categorise the key competences required for the teaching of controversial issues. One reason for this might be the perception that each situation is different and no one method is likely to prove successful in all circumstances. However, in the absence of any indication of the kind of competences required to teach issues safely and fairly, it is impossible to devise a rational training regime or help teachers improve their effectiveness in any way. However, although it may not be possible to categorise types of issue, it is possible to categorise the types of problem or challenge which they set for the teacher, for example hostility between students, expressions of prejudice, the suspicions of external stakeholders. Stradling et al. (1984: 113) call these “classroom dilemmas”. By considering what is required to resolve these kinds of dilemmas, both general and more specific, it is possible to arrive at a set of competences that can be used to inform training or teacher self-development. At the end of this “Scoping paper” a suggested list of such competences is available (see appendix).

## **Recommendations**

On the basis of these conclusions it is recommended that:

- ▶ the teaching of controversial issues be considered a priority area for teacher training in EDC/HRE, both for new and existing teachers;
- ▶ training in this area should build on existing training materials wherever possible;
- ▶ training materials should be applicable to and accessible across all European member states, all phases of education and types of school and all teachers, regardless of their subject specialism;
- ▶ the target of training in the first instance should be for classroom teachers (while training for school leaders and managers is also important, this is not the focus of this training pack);
- ▶ training should cover the range of teacher competences, personal as well as theoretical and practical, e.g. those set out in the appendix to this paper;
- ▶ training should begin at a basic level, presupposing no previous experience of working on these competences – more advanced training could be offered later;
- ▶ consideration should also be given to the inclusion of aspects of practice which appear not to be dealt with in any depth in existing resources, e.g. developing the concept (i.e., teaching “about”, as opposed to “through” or “for”) of controversial issues and clarifying it to students, methods for dealing with spontaneous questions and remarks, and the basis on which teachers should decide whether or when they should reveal their own opinions and allegiances to students;
- ▶ the role of a whole-school approach and the participation of external stakeholders in the teaching of controversial issues, while important, is also better left to a later phase of training;
- ▶ consideration should be given to the idea of developing a training course which would be “modular” in construction, e.g. the first module being a foundation course for classroom teachers, the second a more advanced course or a module for school leaders on a whole-school approach, a third one involving parents or other stakeholders, a fourth one for students and so on.

## **Appendix – Teacher competences for teaching controversial issues**

### **1. Personal**

- ▶ awareness of one's own beliefs and values and how these have been shaped through personal experience and self-reflection, and the potential impact of these on one's teaching of controversial issues.
- ▶ Awareness of and self-reflection on the pros and cons of revealing one's own beliefs and values to students and having a personal policy on this on the basis of the benefits to students and one's sense of personal integrity.

### **2. Theoretical**

- ▶ understanding how controversy arises and the ways it is resolved in a democracy, including the role of democratic dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution.
- ▶ Understanding the role of teaching about controversial issues in education for EDC/HRE, including its aims and objectives, its methods and challenges and how these may be overcome.

### **3. Practical**

- ▶ using a range of teaching roles (e.g. "neutral chairperson", "balanced" approach, "devil's advocate" and "stated commitment"), selecting and implementing these appropriately according to the circumstances.
- ▶ Managing controversial subject matter sensitively and safely through the selection and implementation of appropriate teaching strategies, e.g. establishment of ground rules, de-personalising and distancing strategies, use of structured discussion formats, etc.
- ▶ Presenting issues fairly in the absence of neutral, balanced or comprehensive sources of information, e.g. through the use of problem- or enquiry-based learning.
- ▶ Handling spontaneous questions and remarks of a controversial nature with confidence, turning them into positive teaching opportunities.
- ▶ Co-operating with other stakeholders over the introduction and teaching of controversial issues, e.g. school staff, parents or others, to enrich the learning experience of students and extend responsibility for and ownership of the challenge.

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## **Part B**

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# Programme of training activities

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**T**he “Programme of training activities” consists of a series of active and reflective learning exercises exploring the teaching of controversial issues in the context of democratic citizenship and human rights education.

It is designed to help teachers and educators recognise the value of engaging young people in controversial issues in their classrooms and schools and to develop the confidence and capability to manage this engagement safely and effectively.

The programme is divided into three sections:

- ▶ Section 1 – “Introducing controversial issues” covers the concept of controversial issues and some of the challenges of teaching them in classrooms and schools;
- ▶ Section 2 – “Teaching methods” examines some of the teaching methods which can be employed for introducing controversial issues safely;
- ▶ Section 3 – “Reflection and evaluation” provides ideas for self-evaluation and follow-up activities.

## Implementing the programme of training activities

The activities form a unified programme to be implemented over the course of a two-day training seminar. Where less time is available, individual activities may be selected and put together to form a shorter programme or used as stand-alone sessions.

The activities are designed to be used across all European countries and to be accessible for the full range of school phases and types – from primary to upper secondary and high school to vocational institutions. They are suitable for all teachers, specialists and non-specialists, but are likely to be of particular interest to those responsible for planning and teaching civic and citizenship education, social studies and humanities subjects.

Instructions for each activity are set out clearly in a step-by-step way, including the theme, method, expected outcomes and time needed. However, these are only meant as a guide. The ultimate decision as to how the activities are implemented is the responsibility of the facilitator/trainer.

## Outcomes

The overall aim of the programme is the development of participants’ professional competences for teaching controversial issues.

These competences fall into three categories:

- ▶ personal competences, including the ability to reflect on one’s personal beliefs and values and their impact in the classroom, and to judge when it is and is not appropriate to share them with students;
- ▶ theoretical competences, including understanding the nature of controversy in a democracy and the role of dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution, and the corresponding value of controversial subject matter in democratic citizenship and human rights education;
- ▶ practical competences, including the ability to adopt a range of teaching roles in the classroom, use a range of strategies to manage controversial issues sensitively, present issues fairly in the absence of the full facts, handle controversial student off-the-cuff remarks and co-operate with other stakeholders.

While some of these competences are linked to specific activities, others tend to run transversally through the programme as a whole. Facilitators/trainers should familiarise themselves with these goals and refer to them whenever the opportunity arises.

## **The role of the facilitator/trainer**

The role of the facilitator/trainer is to guide participants through the programme of training activities, preparing the materials required, gearing exercises towards the interests and needs of the participants, managing time effectively and bringing out and reinforcing important learning points.

The facilitator/trainer should be aware that it is not their job to tell teachers how to teach: this is for participants to decide. The facilitator/trainer can, however, make participants aware of the likely consequences of particular actions or policies, for example of taking sides in a classroom debate, as a way of informing their decisions.

It is important that the facilitator/trainer should make it clear from the outset that they have no “hidden agenda”: their role is simply to guide participants through the programme. They should explain that they are not there to change participants’ views or to judge them on account of opinions they hold or do not hold on an issue. On the contrary, they should ask participants for their opinions and experiences and, whenever possible, create opportunities for them to share these with others.

One problem that is quite likely to arise is that participants may be expecting or ask for factual information on specific controversial issues, for example on the spread of Islamic extremism, on the numbers of migrants (legal and illegal) moving between European countries, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, scientific research on climate change, or similar. If this happens, the facilitator/trainer should explain politely that the purpose of the programme is to explore general principles which can apply to any issue, not to analyse particular issues in depth. It would be a practical impossibility for the facilitator/trainer to provide enough information to satisfy every participant. They might also add that although ascertaining the facts is an important aspect of analysing an issue, it is important not to put too much reliance on it. “Facts” can often be unreliable or disputed. Even if it were desirable, it would never be possible to ascertain the full facts about a situation. Rather, what is more important is how, in the absence of the full facts, one can present a disputed issue fairly in the classroom (this is the subject of Activity 2.5).

## **Section 1: Introducing controversial issues**

	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Duration</b>
1.1	Introduction	What are “controversial issues” and why are they important?	PowerPoint presentation	Define the term “controversial issues”, give relevant examples and reasons for teaching them	20 minutes
1.2	Musical chairs	The emotional dimension of controversial issues	Paired exercise exploring participants’ personal opinions on issues	Awareness of the emotional dimension of controversial issues and its implications for classroom climate and management	20-25 minutes
1.3	Blob tree	Participants’ feelings at the outset of the programme	Cartoon-based self-evaluation exercise	Awareness of initial strengths and weaknesses as a basis for development	10 minutes
1.4	Hot or cold?	What makes an issue controversial?	Ranking exercise with sticky notes	Awareness of a range of factors that can make an issue controversial and the challenges they pose for the teacher	20-25 minutes
1.5	Baggage check	How teachers’ personal beliefs and values impact on their teaching of controversial issues	Small group discussion and period of silent reflection	Awareness of how their own beliefs and values might impact on the teaching of controversial issues	20-30 minutes

## Section 2: Teaching methods

	Activity	Theme	Method	Outcomes	Duration
2.1	Whose side are you on?	How to approach conflicting opinions and truth claims in the classroom	Small group discussion	Awareness of a range of teaching approaches, their advantages and disadvantages and when they are best used	30-40 minutes
2.2	Changing perspectives	Using "de-personalisation" techniques to protect student sensitivities	Paired work – translating "personal" into "societal" statements	Familiarity with "de-personalisation" techniques	30-50 minutes
2.3	The school on the edge of the forest	Using "distancing" techniques to defuse particularly sensitive issues	Story and role playing a public meeting	Familiarity with "distancing" techniques	40-50 minutes
2.4	Other people's shoes	How to help students appreciate other people's points of view	Whole group card exercise on responses to a controversial question	Familiarity with techniques for helping students to appreciate alternative views	30-40 minutes
2.5	World Café	How to handle issues even-handedly and fairly without the need for extensive background information	Formulating and answering questions in small groups	Familiarity with techniques of collective problem solving	30-40 minutes
2.6	Forum Theatre	Dealing with insensitive remarks	Role playing teacher responses to insensitive remarks	Ability to deal positively with insensitive remarks	25-30 minutes

## Section 3: Reflection and evaluation

	Activity	Theme	Method	Outcomes	Duration
3.1	Snowball	Identifying learning goals for the teaching of controversial issues	Small group discussion	Ability to identify appropriate learning goals for the teaching of controversial issues	25 minutes
3.2	Lesson plan	How to plan learning activities on controversial issues	Individual and/or small group work	Having an outline plan for a one-hour learning activity on a controversial issue	20 minutes
3.3	Blue letters	Evaluating the training programme	Writing a letter to the facilitator/trainer	Awareness of how the training programme may be improved (facilitator/trainer)	5 minutes
3.4	Fun tree	Evaluating own learning	Personal reflection and sticky notes activity	Awareness of current level of professional competence and areas for further improvement (participants)	10 minutes



## Section 1

# Introducing controversial issues

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### **ACTIVITY 1.1. INTRODUCTION**

There is a growing consensus across Europe that learning to engage with controversial issues is a vital element in education for democracy and human rights. It develops independent thinking and fosters intercultural dialogue and tolerance and respect for others, as well as a critical approach to the media and the ability to resolve differences democratically without resorting to violence. The activity which follows is designed to introduce participants to the concept of controversial issues as defined in current literature, the sort of issues it includes and the arguments for teaching about them in the classroom and school.

#### **Aim**

To introduce the concept of controversial issues and consider the arguments for teaching controversial issues in classrooms and schools.

#### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ are able to give a formal definition of the term “controversial issues”;
- ▶ are able to identify current examples of issues coming under this definition;
- ▶ are aware of and understand the different arguments for teaching controversial issues in school.

#### **Duration**

20 minutes

#### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ PowerPoint slides
- ▶ laptop and projector.

#### **Preparation**

You need to prepare a short PowerPoint presentation explaining what controversial issues are and why they are important in education for democratic citizenship and human rights. This should include:

- ▶ a definition of the term “controversial issues”;
- ▶ some current examples of controversial issues;
- ▶ a list of reasons for teaching controversial issues.

A definition, ideas for examples and a list of reasons for teaching controversial issues can be found in the support material below.

#### **Tip**

Given the title of the programme, participants are quite likely to come to the training sessions expecting something “really controversial”, so do not hold back in choosing the examples to illustrate your presentation – the more controversial the better. Try to use a range of different types, from local to global, but make sure they are ones with which participants are already familiar and would recognise as potentially controversial

in a school context. A slide sequence of images each illustrating a specific issue would be particularly effective as an initial stimulus, for example about immigration/emigration, extremism and radicalisation, climate change, gender violence, sexual identity, LGBTI rights, cyberbullying, corruption, political protest, violence in schools, animal experimentation or genetically modified (GM) crops.

## Method

1. Use the PowerPoint slides to introduce the definition of controversial issues used in the programme. Give some current examples of issues which would come under this definition, both long-standing and very recent, and outline the different arguments for teaching issues like these in classrooms and schools.
2. Ask participants which arguments they think are the strongest. Take a few responses so you can gauge where they stand on the issue at the outset.
3. Sum up, explaining that while in theory there are strong arguments for teaching controversial issues in classrooms and schools, translating this into practice can be particularly challenging. The purpose of the “Programme of training activities” is to unpack the different challenges it poses and suggest teaching methods and strategies which might be used to deal with them.

## Suggestion

Where there is plenty of time you may wish to use a “diamond nine” activity to stimulate discussion of the relevant merits of different arguments for teaching controversial issues. Write the arguments given below on nine cards and make sets for small group discussions. Groups discuss the arguments on the cards and then arrange them in a diamond shape with the ones they most agree with at the top and the least at the bottom.

## Tip

This is a useful point at which to outline the contents of the “Programme of training activities” and the challenges and questions with which it deals.



## **ACTIVITY 1.2. MUSICAL CHAIRS**

Feelings can run high when controversial issues are discussed in public. The more strongly we feel about an issue the more likely we are to see the views we hold about it not as added extras but as fundamental to our sense of who we are as people. Thus there is a tendency to interpret attacks on our ideas and arguments as attacks on us as individuals and to feel apprehensive or embarrassed about expressing our opinions to people we do not know or trust. The following activity is designed to help participants explore the emotional dimension of controversial issues and its implications for classroom climate and management. It is also designed as an “icebreaker” to help participants to get to know each other better.

### **Aim**

To explore the emotive nature of controversial issues and its implications for classroom climate and management.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ are aware of the emotive nature of controversial issues;
- ▶ are able to identify the kinds of emotions that are likely to arise when controversial issues are discussed;
- ▶ are aware of the implications of these for classroom climate and management.

### **Duration**

20-25 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ a list of controversial statements
- ▶ facility for playing music, e.g. CD player, laptop and speakers.

### **Preparation**

Think of some controversial statements, say five or six. Try to choose examples which participants will find particularly emotive, which will polarise opinions and are likely to be of interest and relevance to the young people they teach.

Sample statements for discussion:

- ▶ “There is too much emphasis on children’s rights and not enough on children’s responsibilities”
- ▶ “Gay couples should be able to adopt”
- ▶ “The EU is a waste of time and money and should be disbanded”
- ▶ “Parents should not be allowed to smack their children”
- ▶ “Nuclear weapons are necessary in order to preserve world peace”
- ▶ “Young people should be able to vote from age 16”
- ▶ “They should bring back the death penalty for those found guilty of acts of violent extremism”
- ▶ “Animals should have the same rights as humans”
- ▶ “Assisted euthanasia is a humane way to die and should not be prosecuted”
- ▶ “Parents should be able to design their babies – it’s a consumer choice”
- ▶ “The rich should be taxed less because they create wealth that leads to jobs”
- ▶ “There should be no limits on the movement of people between countries”
- ▶ “Gender equality is mainly about women and leads to discrimination against men”
- ▶ “Cannabis should be legalised”

- ▶ “Sexual identity is shaped by society and not by nature”
- ▶ “Politicians are just in it for themselves”
- ▶ “People who smoke and are overweight should pay more for their healthcare”
- ▶ “The discourse of human rights and equality legislation has gone too far and is leading to a ‘risk averse’ society”

## Method

1. Scatter chairs randomly around the room in twos facing each other, one for each participant.
2. Tell participants that they are about to hear some music. When the music starts they should begin walking randomly around the room – or dancing, if they feel like it. When you stop the music, they should quickly sit down on the nearest chair – so everyone ends up in pairs facing each other. At this point you will read out a statement. The person in each pair who was the last to sit down has 30 seconds to tell their partner their personal views on the issue read out. During this time the partner should remain silent and not give any indication of whether they agree or disagree. Then it is the other partner’s turn to express their views on the statement for 30 seconds.
3. Play the music and read out one of the statements prepared earlier.
4. Start the music again and repeat the process.
5. Do this several times for as many statements as you have or as time allows. As a variation, when everyone has got the idea you could ask for participants’ own suggestions of statements to discuss – but insist on topics which are “really controversial”.
6. Arrange the chairs into a circle for discussion.

### Tip

Some participants may be worried about being asked to reveal their private opinions in public (this, in fact, is a lesson in itself). Tell them that it is the only exercise in which they will be asked to do this. They will only be speaking to one person at a time and they will not be judged on any views they express or do not express. Explain that it is important for them to be put into this situation to be able to appreciate and deal with the emotions that are likely to arise when controversial issues are discussed in school.

## Discussion

Lead a discussion on the feelings participants experienced during the exercise and what they can learn from this about handling controversial issues in the classroom. For example, what do they think about expecting students to reveal their personal opinions in class? What kind of classroom climate do they think is most helpful for discussions on controversial issues and how is it created? What do they think about having classroom or school rules to govern discussion?

### Tip

It is a good idea to keep the discussion relatively brief at this stage. Explain that there will be more opportunities for reflection and dialogue as the programme unfolds.

[Activity adapted from [www.anti-bias-netz.org/](http://www.anti-bias-netz.org/)]

### **ACTIVITY 1.3. BLOB TREE**

Self-reflection is an important aspect of teachers' professional development. The following activity is designed to help participants reflect on and record their feelings in the initial stages of the programme.

#### **Aim**

To help participants reflect on and record their feelings at the outset of the programme.

#### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ recognise their initial strengths and weaknesses in relation to the teaching of controversial issues as a basis for development.

#### **Duration**

10 minutes

#### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ copies of the Blob tree cartoon.

#### **Preparation**

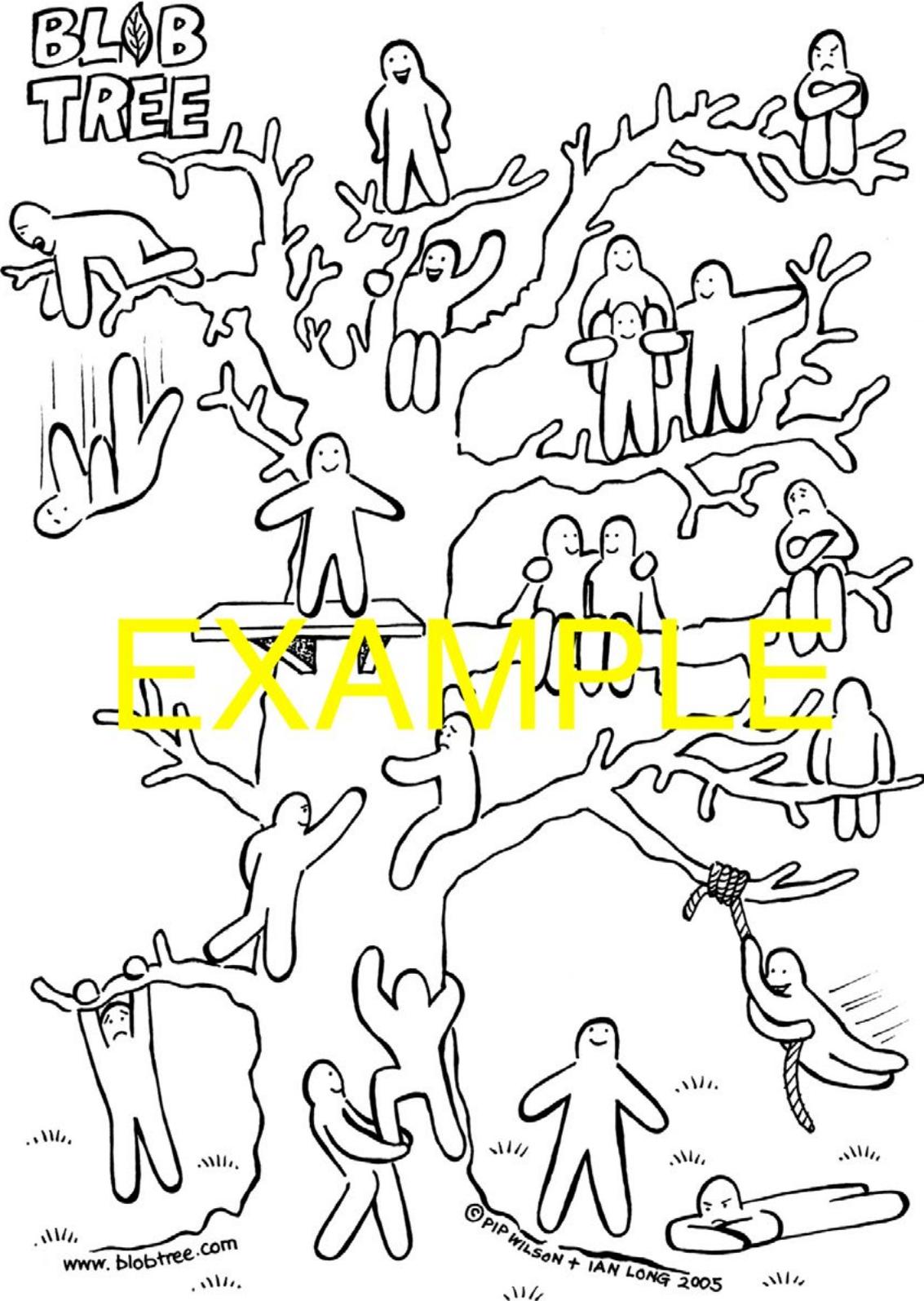
Make copies of the Blob tree cartoon below – one for each participant.

#### **Method**

1. Hand out copies of the Blob tree cartoon.
2. Ask participants to look at the cartoon silently for a few moments and decide which of the characters most represents the way they are feeling right now – about the programme and the prospect of teaching some of the controversial issues that have been mentioned. They colour or shade the character they have chosen.
3. Allow a few more minutes for participants to share their choice with others if they wish, but stress that there is no compulsion to do this if they do not want to.
4. Explain that you will return to this at the end of the programme and see whether or how their feelings may have changed by then.

**ACTIVITY 1.3. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

**Blob tree**



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To purchase this product, please go to [www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com) and choose "Blob Tree".

## **ACTIVITY 1.4. HOT OR COLD?**

Why are some issues controversial? What makes some issues more controversial than others? The following activity is designed to help participants explore the factors that make issues controversial and the challenges posed by different types of issue in the classroom and school.

### **Aim**

To explore the different factors that make issues controversial and the challenges posed by different types of issue in the classroom and school.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ are aware of the sorts of factors that make issues controversial;
- ▶ recognise the challenges that different types of issue pose in the classroom and school.

### **Duration**

20-25 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ sticky notes – several for each participant
- ▶ three large labels – “HOT”, “COLD” and “LUKEWARM”
- ▶ a blank wall
- ▶ handouts.

### **Preparation**

Find an area of blank wall and attach a large label saying “HOT” at one end. Attach another label saying “COLD” at the other end and one saying “LUKEWARM” in the middle. Make copies of the handout on factors that make issues controversial – one for each participant – or convert it into a PowerPoint slide (support material below).

### **Method**

1. Give participants some sticky notes, say five or six each.
2. Ask them to think of examples of controversial issues and write one on each of their sticky notes. Explain that there is no need to “play safe” – they can be as controversial as they like.
3. Encourage them to reflect on how they feel about teaching the controversial issues they have chosen.
4. Ask them to stick each of their sticky notes on the wall in the position that indicates how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel about teaching it – COLD for completely comfortable, HOT for too hot to handle and LUKEWARM for no feelings either way.
5. Give them a few minutes to look at the issues other people have chosen and where they have positioned them.
6. Arrange chairs into a circle for discussion.

#### **Tip**

This exercise is best done in silence. It allows participants to develop and express their own concerns and anxieties without being influenced by anyone else.

### Variations

There are several variant exercises on the same theme, any one of which may be used in preference to the one above.

**Washing line** – A piece of string is fastened across the room at head height. One end is designated “COLD” and one “HOT” and the middle “LUKEWARM”. Participants write their issues on cards and attach them to the line with clothes pegs.

**Voting with their feet** – A number of controversial issues are written on cards and placed on the floor. As each one is addressed in turn, participants move close to or further away from the issue depending on how comfortable/uncomfortable they feel about teaching it.

**Walking the line** – A line is marked out across the room with tape or a piece of string. The facilitator/trainer calls out a number of issues and participants position themselves on the line according to how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel about teaching each topic – HOT and uncomfortable at one end and COLD or very uncomfortable at the other end.

**Graffiti wall** – A space on the wall is designated as the “graffiti wall”. Participants write their controversial issues on sticky notes and stick them on the wall with comments about how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel about teaching them. They read what others have written and add their own comments on sticky notes.

## Discussion

Give out copies of the handout and lead a discussion on the challenges different types of issue pose in the classroom.

### Tip

The challenges of teaching controversial issues tend to fall into a number of distinct categories. To help facilitate discussion on this topic, it is helpful to draw up a list in advance as prompts. It could include the following categories.

#### **The role of the teacher**

Whose side should the teacher take in an argument?

How can the teacher avoid criticisms of bias or indoctrination?

#### **Classroom climate and control**

How can the teacher foster a safe learning environment? How can the teacher keep control in the classroom?

#### **The teacher’s knowledge of the issues**

How can the teacher ensure that they know about the issue(s) being addressed? How can they come across as knowledgeable about the issue(s)?

#### **The personal experiences and reactions of young people to the issues**

How can they reduce the risk of students getting upset or offended? How do they handle it if students get upset?

#### **Time frame**

How do they fit all this into a lesson or series of lessons?

Where do they draw the line in terms of how long an issue is discussed for?

**ACTIVITY 1.4. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

**Factors that make issues controversial**



## **ACTIVITY 1.5. BAGGAGE CHECK**

Everyone carries around a set of beliefs and values which affect the way they see the world and operate in it. This is sometimes known as “cultural baggage”. These beliefs and values often go unnoticed by the people who hold them. They do not see that their experience is being filtered in this way. Teachers are no different in this respect. The exercise which follows is designed to explore the way teachers’ beliefs and values can affect their attitudes towards controversial issues, and to encourage participants to reflect on the impact of their own beliefs and values on their handling of controversial issues in the classroom and school.

### **Aim**

To explore how teachers’ beliefs and values can affect their attitudes towards controversial issues and to encourage participants to reflect on the impact of their own beliefs and values.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ understand how a teacher’s personal beliefs and values may influence their professional approach to controversial issues;
- ▶ become more aware of the impact of their own beliefs and values on their actions as teachers.

### **Duration**

20-30 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ sets of discussion cards
- ▶ blank cards
- ▶ some small bags
- ▶ flipchart and pen.

### **Method**

Make some sets of discussion cards using the model provided in the support material below. Choose names and character “types” which are likely to be familiar to your participants. As the cards are for small group work, you will need as many sets as the number of the groups you intend to create. Put each set into a small bag – paper or carrier bags will do. You will also need some blank cards, one for each participant, for the end of the exercise.

### **Process**

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Give each group a bag containing a set of discussion cards. Explain that each card contains information about a teacher (no one they know!).
3. Tell groups to pick one of the teachers (cards) out of their bag at random.
4. Ask them to read the information about the teacher on their card and discuss how they think it might influence the position that person takes on controversial issues and the way he or she handles them in the classroom and school.
5. Give groups a few minutes to talk about this, then repeat the process two or three times with some more cards.
6. Rearrange the chairs into a circle and ask for a few volunteers to report on their conclusions – taking the cards one by one and noting any disagreements between the interpretations of different groups as they go on.
7. Introduce and explain the notion of “cultural baggage” and its relevance for teaching controversial issues.

## Discussion

Lead a discussion on the way teachers' beliefs and values can influence their handling of controversial issues. For example, where do they see a teacher's beliefs and values are coming from? How easy do they think it is for teachers to identify their own prejudices and assumptions?

Draw the discussion to a close by asking participants to reflect personally on their own beliefs and values as teachers and how these might relate to their handling of controversial issues. Give each participant a blank card on which to write a sentence about themselves using the model of the discussion cards. Encourage them to reflect seriously on this and its implications for how they approach issues in the classroom and school. Tell them that this is for their private use only and does not have to be shared with anyone else. The exercise should be done in silence. After three or four minutes allow those who want to share their thoughts to find a partner to talk to, but emphasise that this is not compulsory.

### Tip

The period of self-reflection at the end is essential to this exercise. It is important to reserve sufficient time for it.

### Suggestion

A suggestion from piloting the activity in Ireland is to follow up discussion on the personal "baggage" teachers bring with them to school with a consideration of the official "baggage" they take on when they become public employees. This includes the legal responsibilities they bear through formal legislation and official policy as well as through the expectations of school leaders and inspectors, and the moral imperatives that come with being a member of the teaching profession.

### Variations

Which one is the terrorist? A group of trainee teachers in the UK devised an exercise in which participants are given a number of pictures of people's faces (cut out from magazines) and are asked to decide: "Which one is the terrorist?" There is no correct answer, but participants are encouraged to reflect on what was going on in their heads when they were making the decision: "What were you looking for?" They think about the criteria they were applying and the extent to which they were conscious of these at the time.

Which one is the heterosexual? A similar exercise with faces is used in sex and relationships education in Sweden. This time the question asked is: "Which one is the heterosexual?"

This kind of exercise works best when the faces used are chosen so that they give no indication of what the answer to the question might be. The preconceived notions or stereotypes are all in the heads of the participants.

## **ACTIVITY 1.5. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

### **Model discussion cards**

Karina ... loves folk music and folk dancing, is highly patriotic and a member of a nationalist political party
Peter ... was brought up in a strict religious family, does not drink or smoke and takes a leading part in religious services at his place of worship
Deepa ... originally came to this country as a refugee and has never forgotten how badly she was treated in her first few years here
Helena ... lived for a while in a women's refuge and is a strong supporter of women's rights
Ali ... is a trade union representative and campaigns on a range of human rights issues, especially working conditions at home and abroad
Rolf ... retrained as a teacher after several years in the army where he rose through the ranks to become an officer
Tatiana ... comes from one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the country and received her own education abroad
Wim ... has been in a same-sex relationship for a number of years, but he thinks no one in school knows about it



## Section 2

# Teaching methods

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### **Meeting the challenge**

Central to the successful teaching of controversial issues is the teacher's knowledge of appropriate teaching methods and the competence or capability and confidence to apply them effectively in the classroom and school. There is always a certain amount of risk in introducing sensitive subject matter, but with the judicious use of the appropriate teaching techniques the element of risk can be reduced considerably.

There are a number of key pedagogical challenges to be faced, including:

- ▶ how to respond to conflicting truth claims among students, including whether to take sides on an issue – so that the teacher does not feel compromised or the students feel like there is a “hidden agenda”;
- ▶ how to protect the sensitivities of students from different backgrounds and cultures and of those with a personal or family involvement in the topic – so that students do not feel embarrassed, victimised or alienated, or are subject to harassment or bullying;
- ▶ how to defuse tension and prevent discussions from overheating – so that classroom control is maintained and students are able to discuss freely;
- ▶ how to encourage students to listen to other people's points of view – so that students learn to respect each other and to appreciate different opinions;
- ▶ how to handle controversial issues even-handedly without detailed background knowledge or trustworthy sources of evidence on a topic – so that teachers do not feel compromised or vulnerable to criticisms of partiality or incompetence;
- ▶ how to respond to unexpected questions about controversial issues and deal with insensitive remarks – so that the teacher's integrity is maintained and students do not feel hurt or offended.

These challenges are addressed in Section 2 of the “Programme of training activities”. Each of the activities in this section focuses on a separate problem and features a different teaching method. Participants experience the teaching methods in action through active learning exercises which are replicable in the classroom and school. They discuss what they have learned from each exercise and share ideas with each other.

## **ACTIVITY 2.1. WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?**

Teachers are entitled to their views like anyone else. However, this does not necessarily mean that they ought to share them with students, nor that they should favour the students who share their views. So how is a teacher meant to respond to conflicting opinions and arguments in class? Whose side should they take? This exercise is designed to present participants with a range of pedagogical approaches to this question and their respective advantages and disadvantages.

### **Aim**

To explore the advantages and disadvantages of different pedagogical approaches to diversity of opinion in the classroom.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ are aware of a range of positions they can take on controversial issues;
- ▶ understand their respective advantages and disadvantages;
- ▶ understand the situations in which each can be usefully employed.

### **Duration**

30-40 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ flipchart paper and marker pens
- ▶ discussion cards
- ▶ paper clips
- ▶ sticky tape
- ▶ handouts.

### **Preparation**

Using the template provided make some position cards for group work. As there will be six groups, you should make six cards – one for each group. You will also need to make copies of the handout on teacher roles in classroom discussion – one for each participant.

### **Process**

1. Remind participants that conflict of opinion is one of the defining features of a controversial issue. One of the challenges of teaching controversial issues is deciding on the position one should take in relation to this. Should teachers take sides? If so, whose side? If not, how do they ensure that issues are handled fairly and that the process of discussing them is a purely educational one? Explain that there are different positions a teacher can take on this and the activity in which they are about to participate is designed to help them evaluate some of these.
2. Divide the participants into six groups and arrange each group around a table.
3. Give each group a piece of flipchart paper, a marker pen, a paper clip and one of the position cards.
4. Ask groups to consider the position set out on their card and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of adopting this as a policy for teaching controversial issues. They should note their conclusions on the flipchart paper, dividing it vertically – one side for advantages and one for disadvantages. Explain that they should not use all of the paper at this stage, but leave a portion blank at the bottom for later.
5. After three or four minutes have elapsed, ask groups to attach their position card to the top of their paper with the paper clip and move to another table en bloc.

6. At the next table they read the comments of the previous group – ticking what they agree with and adding their own comments where they disagree or think something is missing.
7. After a few minutes, slightly less time than before, ask them to move to the next table and repeat the process.
8. Repeat the same process until everyone has been around all the tables. Then stick the pieces of flipchart paper on the wall and invite the participants to come up and read them.
9. Rearrange the chairs into a circle. Give out the handouts and ask participants to read them quietly, noting the additional information and the names given to different positions.

## **Discussion**

Suggest two or three controversial issues and lead a short discussion on the teaching approaches most appropriate for handling these.

Draw the discussion to a conclusion by asking participants to try to formulate rule-of-thumb guidelines on when and when not to use the different approaches.

## **ACTIVITY 2.1. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

### **Position cards**

Always make your own views known
Adopt the role of a neutral chairperson – never let anyone know your own views
Make sure students are presented with a wide range of different views on every issue
Challenge students' views by arguing the opposite from them
Try to support particular students or groups of students by arguing on their behalf
Always promote the "official" view on an issue – what the authorities expect you to say

### **Teacher positions on controversial issues**

#### **Stated commitment: in which the teacher always makes known his/her views during discussion**

Potential strengths:

- ▶ Students will try to guess what the teacher thinks anyway. Stating your own position makes everything above board.
- ▶ If students know where the teacher stands on the issue they can discount his or her prejudices and biases.
- ▶ It is better to state your preferences after discussion rather than before.
- ▶ It should only be used if students' dissenting opinions are treated with respect.
- ▶ It can be an excellent way of maintaining credibility with students since they do not expect us to be neutral.

Potential weaknesses:

- ▶ It can stifle classroom discussion, inhibiting students from arguing a line against that of the teacher's.
- ▶ It may encourage some students to argue strongly for something they do not believe in simply because it is different from what the teacher thinks.
- ▶ Students often find it difficult to distinguish facts from values. It is even more difficult if the purveyor of facts and values is the same person, i.e. the teacher.

#### **Stated neutrality: in which the teacher adopts the role of an impartial chairperson of a discussion group**

Potential strengths:

- ▶ It minimises undue influence of the teacher's own bias.
- ▶ It gives everyone a chance to take part in free discussion.
- ▶ It provides scope for open-ended discussion, i.e. the class may move on to consider issues and questions the teacher has not thought of.
- ▶ It presents a good opportunity for students to exercise communication skills.
- ▶ It works well if you have plenty of background material.

Potential weaknesses:

- ▶ Students may find it artificial.
- ▶ It can damage the rapport between teacher and class if it does not work.
- ▶ It depends on students being familiar with the method elsewhere in the school or it will take a long time to acclimatise them with it.
- ▶ It may simply reinforce students' existing attitudes and prejudices.

- ▶ It could be very difficult with less able students.
- ▶ The role of neutral chair does not always suit the teacher's personality.

### **A balanced approach: in which the teacher presents students with a wide range of alternative views**

Potential strengths:

- ▶ One of the main functions of a humanities or social studies teacher is to show that issues are hardly ever black and white.
- ▶ It may be necessary when the class is polarised on an issue.
- ▶ It is most useful when dealing with issues about which there is a great deal of conflicting information.
- ▶ If a balanced range of opinion does not emerge from the group, then it is up to the teacher to see that the other aspects are brought out.

Potential weaknesses:

- ▶ Is there such a thing as a balanced range of opinions?
- ▶ It avoids the main point of conveying the impression that "truth" is a grey area that exists between two alternative sets of opinions.
- ▶ Balance means very different things to different people – teaching cannot be value-free.
- ▶ It can lead to very teacher-directed lessons – with them always intervening to maintain the so-called balance.

### **The devil's advocate strategy: in which the teacher consciously takes up the opposite position to the one expressed by students or in teaching materials**

Potential strengths:

- ▶ It can be great fun and very effective in stimulating the students to contribute to discussion.
- ▶ It may be essential when faced by a group who all seem to share the same opinion.
- ▶ Most classes seem to have a majority line which needs challenging.
- ▶ It livens things up when the discussion is beginning to peter out.

Potential weaknesses:

- ▶ Students may identify the teacher with the view he or she is putting forward – parents may worry.
- ▶ It may reinforce students' prejudices.

### **Ally: in which the teacher takes the side of a student or groups of students**

Potential strengths:

- ▶ This helps weaker students or marginalised groups in class to have a voice.
- ▶ It can show students how arguments may be built on and developed.
- ▶ It helps other students to appreciate ideas and arguments they might not otherwise hear.
- ▶ It sets an example of collaborative working.

Potential weaknesses:

- ▶ Other students may feel it is a subtle way of the teacher promoting his or her own views.
- ▶ Other students may see it as favouritism.
- ▶ It may make students think they do not have to bother arguing their corner because you will do it for them.

### **Official line: in which the teacher promotes the side dictated by the public authorities**

Potential strengths:

- ▶ It gives the teaching official legitimacy.
- ▶ It can protect the teacher from recriminations by the authorities.
- ▶ It allows the proper presentation of views which students may have previously only half understood or misunderstood.

Potential weaknesses:

- ▶ It can make students feel the teacher is not interested in hearing their views, only his or her own.
- ▶ It can make teachers feel compromised if they do not share the official view themselves.
- ▶ There can be conflicting official views promoted by different public authorities, so which does the teacher follow?
- ▶ There is not always an official view.
- ▶ It is possible for an official line to be in breach of human rights legislation.

## **ACTIVITY 2.2. CHANGING PERSPECTIVES**

One of the challenging aspects of teaching controversial issues is dealing with issues students are personally involved in – such as discussing immigration when immigrant children are in the class. Not knowing in advance whether anyone in the class is involved makes it even more challenging. One way of reducing the risk of inadvertently offending personal sensitivities or alienating students is to frame discussions on the issue in societal rather than personal terms. This technique is known as “de-personalisation”. In the activity which follows, participants explore the advantages and disadvantages of this technique and ways in which it can be applied in practice.

### **Aim**

To explore ways in which the personal sensitivities of students may be protected by “de-personalising” the language in which issues are discussed.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ are aware of problems that can arise when students are personally involved in an issue;
- ▶ understand how some of these problems may be averted by changing the language used to discuss an issue;
- ▶ are able to frame statements about controversial issues in less threatening, societal terms.

### **Duration**

30-50 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ examples of “personal” questions on slips of paper
- ▶ examples of “personal” questions reframed as “societal” ones.

### **Preparation**

Draw up a list of questions on different controversial issues in which the question asked is directed at the students themselves, their families or community, for example “Do you think it is a sin to be gay?” Try to choose examples which you think might really compromise some students in the classroom or in school. There are some examples from different countries in the support material below. Write the questions on slips of paper. You need one question for every two participants.

You will also need two or three ready-made examples of how to reframe a “personal” question as a “societal” one, e.g.

- ▶ “What do you think about migrant workers?” (Personal)
- ▶ “What do people think about migrant workers?” (Societal)
- ▶ “What is your attitude to gay couples adopting?” (Personal)
- ▶ “How does society view gay couples adopting?” (Societal)

It may be useful to put these on a PowerPoint slide.

### **Method**

1. Introduce the activity by talking briefly about situations where students are personally involved in an issue raised in the classroom or in school. Ask participants for any experience they have of this and any problems it caused, or of situations where it might be a problem.
2. Emphasise the importance of trying to protect young people in this situation and explain the technique of “de-personalisation” using the examples you have already prepared.

3. Divide participants into pairs and give each pair a question to de-personalise.
4. Pairs present their suggestions to the group in turn and speculate on the possible risks of not de-personalising the question they have been given.

### Tip

It is usually easier to start with examples using words which explicitly denote the perspective, for example “you” or “yours” for a personal perspective and “one”, “someone” or “society” for a societal one. You can then move on to examples where the perspective is less explicit, for example shifting from “Do you think it is OK to make jokes about religion?” to “Is it OK to make jokes about religion?”

### Variation

In a version of this activity developed in Montenegro, participants are divided into groups and given a list of controversial topics, for example Roma people, domestic violence, contraception. Using these topics groups brainstorm examples of questions which they think would be better de-personalised and try to de-personalise them.

The version used here is an adaptation of the original activity developed in Ireland (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit (2012), *Tackling controversial issues in the classroom – A resource for citizenship education*).

### Discussion

Lead a short discussion on the value of de-personalising classroom language, for example what do they think are its advantages and disadvantages? How easy do they find it to do? Do they think it is always necessary?

### Tip

It is useful to warn participants that, useful though it may be in certain situations, this technique is not applicable in all circumstances and should not be made into an absolute rule. Teacher trainers in Ireland, for example, point to the difficulty of addressing issues of religious and intercultural understanding in Northern Ireland without teachers and students bringing in personal perspectives from the society in which they live and have grown up. In addition, there can sometimes be good reasons for asking for personal feelings and opinions, for example to deepen understanding of a range of perspectives, to learn more about the influence of culture and history on how issues have evolved and are presented, to increase empathy and to ensure that discussions are realistic and grounded in “real life”.

## **ACTIVITY 2.2. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

Examples of “personal” statements:

- ▶ How many of you were not born in this country?
- ▶ What does your religion say about girls’ education?
- ▶ Have you ever been bullied?
- ▶ What in your opinion is the safest form of contraception?
- ▶ Have you ever taken an illegal drug?
- ▶ Do your parents hit you when you misbehave?

## **ACTIVITY 2.3. THE SCHOOL ON THE EDGE OF THE FOREST**

When an issue is particularly sensitive it may be safer to approach it indirectly than tackle it “head on”. One way of doing this is to use a historical, geographical or imaginary parallel. This technique is known as “distancing”. It helps prevent explosive topics getting out of hand and enables students to put aside their initial prejudices and assumptions and become more open to the complexity of an issue. In the activity which follows participants explore the benefits of this technique using an imaginary story about a divided society.

### **Aim**

To explore ways in which “distancing” can be used to introduce controversial issues more sensitively and flexibly.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ understand the purpose of “distancing”;
- ▶ are able to apply “distancing” techniques in the classroom and school.

### **Duration**

40-50 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ copies of the story “The school on the edge of the forest”.

### **Preparation**

Make copies of the story in the support material below – one for each participant. You should also prepare your part in the role play – how you can encourage the participants to get involved, the arguments you will use in role, questions to ask, etc.

### **Method**

1. Arrange the chairs in rows facing the front with a clear gap down the middle.
2. Describe the technique of “distancing” and explain how it works with controversial issues. Tell participants that they are now going to look at what this looks like in practice.
3. Read the story aloud.
4. Participants say how they think the school (in the story) came to be burned down, who might have been responsible and what their motives could have been.
5. Ask whether they think the teacher should try to rebuild the school.
6. Explain that the teacher is likely to need the support of both the communities if she or he is to rebuild the school and make it work. This will not be easy. Tell participants they are going to role play what they think is likely to happen should the teacher try to do this.
7. Participants imagine they are in a public meeting called by the teacher to try to gain public support for the rebuilding of the school. They will be playing the part of the communities: the forest folk on one side of the room and the plains folk on the other. The facilitator will play the part of the teacher and stands at the front.
8. Participants get in role. The facilitator as teacher welcomes everyone to the meeting. She or he describes the background to the meeting, explains why the people present have been invited and asks whether they will be prepared to provide the support she or he needs to build the school again and to make it a success. Participants in role as community members respond to this request with questions, comments, etc., and the role play continues from there. Fifteen minutes should be enough, but be prepared to extend

the time if it is going particularly well. Then the facilitator thanks the audience for coming and brings the meeting to a close.

9. Participants come out of role for discussion.

### Suggestion

This activity can be particularly effective when the teacher's role is played by one of the participants. You should note, however, that this role is crucial to the activity and it is best not to ask anyone else to take it on unless you are sure they can carry it off well.

### Discussion

Lead a discussion on what participants have learned from the activity. Do they think it is replicable in the classroom and school? If so, which issue(s) could it introduce? How would they lead from this parallel into the issue itself? What do they think are the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of activity?

### Teaching controversial issues through stories

Stories can be an excellent way of introducing sensitive and complicated issues in the classroom and school. However, to work well the situation in the story needs to replicate closely the key elements in the issue which it is being used to introduce – to have embedded within it the same range of viewpoints, arguments and interests, etc. This is often easier to achieve in a purpose-written story or by adapting elements of an existing story to match the issue in reality.

The story used in this activity was developed in the UK (Huddleston T. and Rowe D. (2001), *Good thinking – Education for citizenship and moral responsibility*, Volume 3, London: Evans). Originally used to introduce conflict over control of education, it has since been used in the context of divided societies, such as Northern Ireland and Cyprus.

## **ACTIVITY 2.3. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

“The school on the edge of the forest”

“Many years ago there was a country whose only claim to fame was that it was almost completely divided in two. Half of the country was covered in dense forest. The other half was a vast treeless plain.

The forest folk made their living almost entirely from trees. They felled huge oaks with heavy axes, burning birch poles to make charcoal and planting young saplings to replace the felled timber. They built timber houses in woodland glades and set up shrines dedicated to the spirits of the forest. They were timid people, living spiritual lives in peaceful harmony with each other and with nature.

The plains folk were farmers. They ploughed the earth to grow crops. Their houses were made entirely of stone. Their god was the god of grain. Once a year in autumn they held a huge week-long festival to celebrate the end of the harvest when there was much eating, drinking and riotous behaviour.

Apart from the trading of essential items, there was very little contact between the two communities. Although they spoke basically the same language, many words and phrases were unique to one or other of the groups. Nor did either of them make much of an effort to understand each other’s way of life, even though it might have been of benefit to them.

Rather, the two communities viewed each other with mutual suspicion. The plains folk believed that, given the opportunity, the forest folk would plant up their beloved fields with trees. The forest folk believed that, if they were allowed, the plains folk would chop down all the forest and plough it up for crops.

Few people in the country were educated. The forest folk and plains folk were both extremely poor. Most made just enough money to survive, in contrast to the people in neighbouring countries who were growing rich from the sale of foodstuffs, textiles and manufactured items.

Then one day a young teacher set up home on the edge of the forest. The young man was unusual in that, although he had grown up on the plain, his mother had been born to a forest family.

The young teacher decided that he would build a school. It would be the first school to be built anywhere in that region. At a point where the forest and the plain met, the young man set about constructing a small one-storey building of wood and stone.

Then he invited the people of the forest and the plain to bring their children to his new school. Parents were wary at first, especially the forest folk. But enough of them were willing to send their children, and pay the small fee the teacher was asking, to enable the school to open.

In the first week, the plains children and the forest children would hardly speak to one another. The forest children kept to themselves, refusing to have anything to do with the other children either in class or in the playground. The plains children called the forest children names and challenged them to fights.

In the second week there were a number of complaints from parents, all blaming the teacher for giving favoured treatment to the children of the other group.

In the third week, things seemed to be getting a little better. The plains children appeared to be less aggressive and the forest children more willing to speak.

In the fourth week, the school was burned to the ground...”

## **ACTIVITY 2.4. OTHER PEOPLE'S SHOES**

Young children and students naturally tend to fix on one side of a situation and have difficulty seeing other points of view. While the potential to see alternatives increases with age, it is often overridden by social and cultural norms or fails to develop through lack of appropriate life experiences. Controversial issues, on the other hand, tend to be multidimensional. Helping children and young people to identify and appreciate alternative points of view is an important element in teaching about controversial issues. In the activity which follows participants explore ways in which students can be helped to see issues from a range of perspectives.

### **Aim**

To explore ways in which students can be helped to see issues from a range of perspectives.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ recognise the multidimensional nature of controversial issues;
- ▶ understand why students sometimes have difficulty seeing other points of view;
- ▶ are familiar with techniques which help students see issues from a range of perspectives.

### **Duration**

30-40 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ "footprint" role cards.

### **Preparation**

Cut some blank cards into the shape of a life-size footprint or use the footprint template in the support material. You will need one for every participant and a few extra ones.

Think of a controversial issue and pose it in the form of a question, for example "What do you think the government should do about religious extremism?" (France) or "Do you think 'fracking' for oil should be allowed in the north of England?" (UK). Choose a question which is likely to divide participants. On the extra "footprint" cards write some different answers to the question, preferably ones you think the participants are unlikely to express themselves – no more than two or three sentences.

### **Method**

1. Arrange the chairs in a large circle round the room and place a blank "footprint" card on each.
2. Pose the question you selected earlier and ask participants to write their answers on the card silently – two or three sentences only.
3. Collect in all the cards, mix them up and place them face down on the floor in the middle of the room – adding the cards you prepared earlier.
4. Participants each choose a card at random and read it quietly to themselves.
5. Ask a volunteer to stand up, find a space in the room and read out the opinion on their card.
6. The other participants check the opinions on their card and if they are exactly the same they go and stand next to him/her.
7. A second volunteer reads out their card and chooses a place to stand in terms of the similarity of their opinion to the first one – the more similar the closer, the more different the further away.
8. Repeat the process until everyone is standing up.
9. Participants look round at the range of opinion in the room then return to their seats for discussion.

### **Tip and variations**

This activity works best if some initial work has already been done on the topic under discussion. It helps to warm participants up for the activity.

There are many other activities which help students to “put themselves in other people’s shoes” – including role plays, simulations and formal debates.

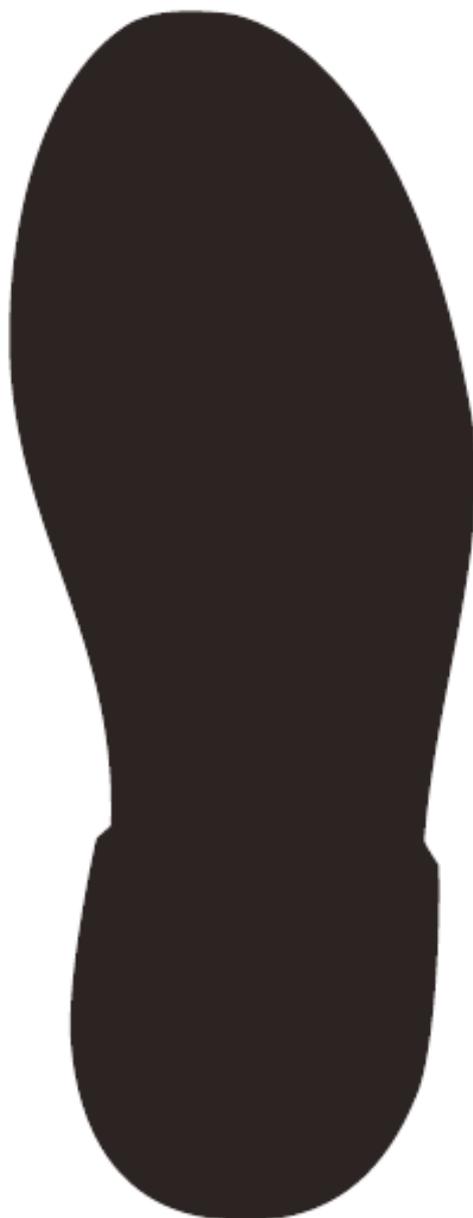
The activity featured here has been adapted from one developed in Ireland (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit (2012), *Tackling controversial issues in the classroom – A resource for citizenship education*).

### **Discussion**

Lead a short discussion on what participants have learned from the activity, for example what did they learn about the topic in question? Did it make any of them consider changing their opinion? Could they replicate this activity in school? What are its advantages and disadvantages? Do they have any other activities like this to share?

## **ACTIVITY 2.4. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

Footprint stencil



## **ACTIVITY 2.5. WORLD CAFÉ**

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching controversial issues is their complex nature. Unpacking such issues in any meaningful way in the classroom or the school seems to require specialist subject knowledge and expertise which few teachers possess and can be difficult and time-consuming to get hold of. It is even more difficult if the issue is very recent or still unfolding. Lack of accurate and balanced information is one of the most common teacher concerns about controversial issues. In the activity which follows participants explore how “collective problem-solving” activities can be used to enable controversial issues to be introduced safely without the need for extensive background information. “Collective problem solving” reverses the traditional approach to classroom and school learning – instead of the teacher providing students with the information, students ask each other for it or how to access it.

### **Aim**

To explore how “collective problem solving” can enable controversial issues to be introduced into the classroom and school even-handedly and fairly when there is little available background information.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ understand the idea of “collective problem solving”;
- ▶ are aware of its potential benefits;
- ▶ are able to apply “collective problem-solving” techniques in the classroom and school.

### **Duration**

30-40 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ images relating to a controversial issue
- ▶ flipchart paper.

### **Preparation**

Choose a recent controversial issue and collect some images which relate to it – newspaper photographs, internet downloads, cartoons, etc. These are for small group work, so you will need as many images as the number of groups you intend to create. Glue each image to the middle of a piece of flipchart paper.

### **Method**

1. Arrange the chairs around tables for small group work and place a piece of flipchart paper and an image on each table.
2. Divide participants into small groups and briefly outline the issue you have chosen for them to work on.
3. Groups discuss the image on their table and write on the flipchart paper any questions it raises for them about the issue.
4. After two or three minutes, groups move to a new table where they discuss the questions posed by the previous group and try to offer some answers, writing them next to the questions on the flipchart paper. Groups can also write more questions if they wish.
5. Groups move on again and repeat the process. They do this until they have been around all tables.
6. Participants go around the room reading the questions and answers on each table.
7. Ask participants what they think they have learned about the issue from doing the exercise. Do they feel it has broadened their understanding of it? Where would they like to take it next?

### **Suggestion**

The 6Ws is a useful technique here. It is used in the UK to help young people formulate questions. The teacher stipulates that every question students formulate should begin with one of the words: what, when, where, who, how or why?

### **Discussion**

Lead a short discussion on the use of “collective problem solving” to support the teaching of controversial issues, for example what do they see as its advantages and disadvantages? Could they replicate the World Café activity in school? If so, how would they follow it up? Have they any other activities like this to share?

### **Variation**

Silent discussion is a similar activity to World Café and can be used for the same purposes. The teacher devises a number of questions about an issue and writes each question on a piece of flipchart paper. The paper is placed strategically on a number of tables scattered around the room and the students move around these writing responses to the questions silently. They then read other people’s responses, write counter-responses and so on.

Versions of these two activities have been used in schools in the UK to teach about the 2011 London riots.

## **ACTIVITY 2.6. FORUM THEATRE**

Teachers cannot control everything in the classroom or the school. However carefully a lesson is prepared there is always the possibility of the teacher being “put on the spot” by insensitive remarks made by students either in or out of class. In the activity which follows, participants explore different ways of responding to these sorts of remarks and consider the role of class rules and school policy in creating a climate which both reduces their incidence and helps teachers to deal with them when they occur.

### **Aim**

To consider ways of handling insensitive student remarks and the role of class rules and school policy in creating a climate which both reduces their incidence and helps teachers to deal with them when they occur.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ are able to handle insensitive student remarks confidently and effectively;
- ▶ understand how setting the right classroom and school rules and climate can help with this;
- ▶ recognise the value of school policy in creating a supportive school ethos.

### **Duration**

25-30 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ handout of some typical examples of awkward student remarks.

### **Preparation**

Think of two or three examples of the sorts of insensitive remarks students might make in relation to controversial issues inside or outside the class, for example asking the teacher “Are you gay?” (Montenegro), or saying “Pakis are all the same” (UK). You will find some examples from different countries in the handout in the support material below.

### **Method**

1. Introduce the problem of insensitive student remarks using either the examples on the handout or those you prepared earlier. Participants with personal experience of this can share one or two examples themselves if they wish. Talk briefly about the difficulties of knowing how to respond to these kinds of remarks and the risks of not responding or responding badly.
2. Select three volunteers to play the part of teachers. Their role will be to respond to insensitive remarks from students. Ask them to go out of the room and stay outside until you call them in.
3. The rest of the participants stay in and play the role of students.
4. Ask the ones in the room to either choose some examples from the handout or brainstorm some of their own examples of the kind of insensitive remarks teachers are sometimes faced with – either as statements or questions.
5. The first “teacher” is called into the room and responds to one of the examples/brainstormed statements/questions put to them by a “student”.
6. The other two “teachers” are brought in one at a time and each responds to the same statement/question in turn.
7. The “students” compare the three responses and discuss which they think is the best. Then they can add a suggestion of their own if they think they have a better one.
8. Repeat the process several times with different statements/questions.

## **Discussion**

Lead a short discussion on what participants have learned from the activity, for example which ways of responding do they think are the most effective? Have they techniques of their own to share? How do they see classroom and school rules and climate as contributing to this? Would they like these kinds of situations to be covered in general school policy? Have they any experience of this?

## **ACTIVITY 2.6. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

### **Examples of controversial comments or questions to begin the discussion**

Facilitators/trainers should choose the ones best suited to the local circumstances.

- ▶ "I hate foreigners – there are too many of them and they're taking our jobs."
- ▶ "Can we talk about lesbians next week?"
- ▶ "You always favour the girls in the class, don't you?"
- ▶ "Are you going to tell us what we should think again in this lesson?"
- ▶ "What's so bad about being a racist? My dad says he is one."
- ▶ "It's no use asking the fat kids about healthy eating."
- ▶ "How about we have a Nationalist speaker to talk to our class for a change?"
- ▶ "It's our human right not to give an opinion if we don't want to."
- ▶ "Are you gay? You must be, you are always talking about them."
- ▶ "Who are you going to vote for in the general election?"
- ▶ "You always sit on the fence when we discuss issues, do you have any real opinions?"
- ▶ "It's OK to be sexist – just look at what's in the media and on the internet."
- ▶ "The headteacher talks about democracy in this school but spends most of the time acting as a tyrant and you teachers do nothing about it."
- ▶ "Our class thinks that you're a secret communist and that you should be reported to the local authorities."
- ▶ "You never let us discuss 'real issues' about our local community because you're scared of what local politicians will say if they found out."
- ▶ "We, as young people, are consulted by adults on lots of issues, but they never really listen to what we say and what we want changed."

## Section 3

# Reflection and evaluation

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### **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

In Section 3 participants begin to plan what they will do when they are back in their classrooms and schools. They revisit the reasons for teaching controversial issues and consider the goals of teaching and learning in this area. Finally, they reflect on the training pack as a whole, the contribution it has made to their professional development and how they might build on its learning in the future.

### **ACTIVITY 3.1. SNOWBALL**

Tackling controversial issues is about more than giving students a chance to “let off steam” in a controlled environment, however important this may be. It is primarily about learning – about conflicts of value and interest and how to resolve them. As in any other aspect of the curriculum, it is what it is intended students should learn that determines the methods used and how they should be implemented. In the activity which follows participants reflect on the goals of teaching controversial issues, namely the competences to be developed – using a “snowball” discussion activity.

#### **Aim**

To reflect on the goals of teaching controversial issues.

#### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ understand the importance of learning goals;
- ▶ are able to identify appropriate learning goals for the teaching of controversial issues.

#### **Duration**

25 minutes

#### **Method**

1. Introduce the activity by explaining the role of goals in teaching and learning and the importance of having a clear idea of the kind of outcomes one wants to achieve. Tell participants that this next exercise is designed to help them clarify their own understanding of the goals of teaching controversial issues.
2. Divide participants into groups of four.
3. Groups discuss how they would explain the purpose of teaching controversial issues to a group of 14-year-old students. This should take about three to four minutes.
4. Two members from each group leave and join another group. They share the ideas from their previous discussions and build on these to try to refine their response to the task. This should take another three to four minutes.
5. The process is repeated as long as time allows or until all the participants have been in a group together.
6. Arrange chairs into a circle for discussion.

#### **Tip**

It is helpful to choose the age of the students in the task to match the experience of the larger group. But whatever you choose it should be the same for everyone.

## **Discussion**

Lead a discussion on what the participants have learned from this activity, for example has it helped to clarify their goals? Is there a difference between long-term and short-term goals? What kinds of student competences do they feel they should be developing? Is it important to them to try to change students' minds on issues?

## **ACTIVITY 3.2. LESSON PLAN**

Following on from the exploratory and reflective work which makes up the bulk of the “Programme of training activities”, participants are given an opportunity to put their learning into practice.

### **Aim**

To put the lessons of the “Programme of training activities” into practice.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ have an outline plan for a one-hour learning activity on a controversial issue of their choice.

### **Duration**

20 minutes

### **Method**

1. Participants each choose a controversial issue and begin to plan how they will approach that issue with students when they are back in their schools. They draw up an outline plan for a one-hour learning activity using one or more of the techniques or learning activities featured in the “Programme of training activities”. This may be done either individually or in small groups. It should take about 15 minutes.
2. Draw the participants back together for about five minutes to consider any questions the activity may have raised.

### **ACTIVITY 3.3. BLUE LETTERS**

Feedback from participants helps improve how the training activities are implemented with future groups. It also helps participants to reflect on general issues raised by the activities and to feel they have made a personal contribution to the training programme. "Blue letters" is a short written activity which enables participants to share their experience of participating in the "Programme of training activities" with the facilitator/trainer on a one-to-one basis.

#### **Aim**

To provide an opportunity for participants to share their experiences of participating in the "Programme of training activities" with the facilitator/trainer.

#### **Outcomes**

Facilitator/trainer:

- ▶ is aware of how the training activities may be improved with future groups.

Participants:

- ▶ feel they have made a personal contribution to the training programme.

#### **Duration**

5 minutes

#### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ writing paper and envelopes.

#### **Method**

1. Participants are each given a sheet of paper and an envelope.
2. They write a short letter to the facilitator/trainer mentioning any questions or thoughts that may have been raised by participating in the training sessions and anything they would like to ask the facilitator/trainer.
3. The letters are put in the envelopes and are handed to the facilitator/trainer.
4. The facilitator/trainer answers the letters by email after the session has finished – either individually, en bloc or a combination of each.

## **ACTIVITY 3.4. FUN TREE**

In addition to giving feedback on the training activities, it is important at the end of the session for participants to have an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned in the “Programme of training activities” and what needs to be done before they can put it into practice in school. “Fun tree” is a simple activity for enabling participants to reflect on their professional development after participating in the programme.

### **Aim**

To provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on their professional development after participating in the “Programme of training activities”.

### **Outcomes**

Participants:

- ▶ are aware of what they have learned from the “Programme of training activities” and what they need to be able to put their learning into practice back in their classroom and school.

### **Duration**

10 minutes

### **Resources**

You will need:

- ▶ a large piece of flipchart paper with the outline of a tree
- ▶ sticky notes – orange, green and yellow.

### **Preparation**

Draw the outline of a tree with lots of branches on a large piece of flipchart paper.

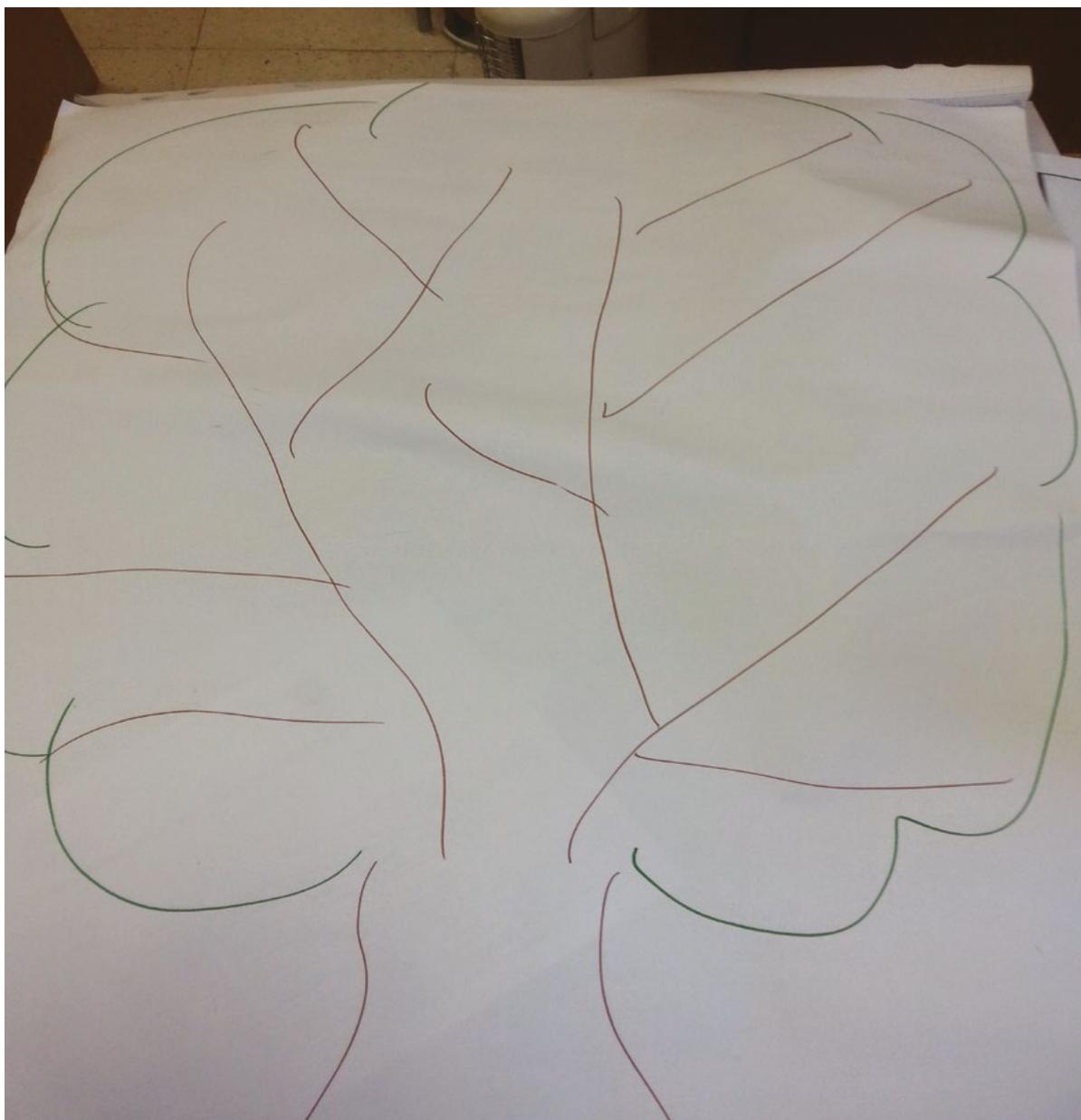
### **Method**

Participants write comments about ideas, techniques and other things they have learned on different coloured sticky notes and attach them to the “tree”, as follows:

- ▶ orange for comments about ideas, techniques, learning they have picked up that are ripe and ready for them to take back to their classrooms and schools;
- ▶ green for comments about ideas, techniques and learning they have picked up that are still raw for them and for which they will need further reflection and development before they think about using them in their classroom/school;
- ▶ yellow for comments about ideas, techniques and learning they have picked up that are in between the above categories and upon which they will need a little bit more reflection before they think about using them in their classroom/school.

## **ACTIVITY 3.4. SUPPORT MATERIAL**

Fun tree – before





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