

Controversial and emotional topics in the classroom

Content

Challenging	2
Interest	2
Imbalance.....	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
Reflective dialogue	3
Differences between dialogue and debate.....	3
Practical points requiring attention in a team	3
Heated discussion	4
Points requiring attention in the classroom	4
Accountability	5
Source.....	5

Challenging

It is not easy to enter into controversial discussions. One quickly arrives at ethically or socially charged topics that are very sensitive. Such as the impact of the coronavirus, measures, and vaccinations. The same can be said for topics related to the climate, geopolitical conflicts, racism, abortion, sexuality, drugs, euthanasia, religion, politics. In these kinds of discussions, there is a risk of polarisation, of 'right-wrong' positions, of increasing prejudice and frustration.

Interest

Yet engaging in dialogue is very important. Reasons for this are:

1. Hogeschool Rotterdam wants to be an inclusive school where everyone can feel safe. This can only be achieved by discussing what this means in terms of our behaviour towards each other.
2. Preparing students to play an active role in society with respect for human rights and the constitution. Preparing students for their role of citizens in a pluralistic society, introducing them to democratic processes and respectful ways of dealing with differences of opinion.
3. Learning to think critically: developing and encouraging the skills to think critically. Also forming opinions based on legitimate information and awareness of disinformation and fake news.
4. Fine-tuning interpersonal skills: developing important behavioural and communication skills: listening well, answering firmly, speaking with conviction, collaborating well and being respectful and tolerant of different points of view.
5. Discussing current affairs, especially if they are closely linked to the students' everyday environment.
6. The positive atmosphere in the group and in the school. Learning to address difficult issues in life appropriately is also part of the educational task Hogeschool Rotterdam.

Imbalance

A controversial topic is one where interests and values are in conflict, where there is strong disagreement over statements or actions. A society can become fundamentally divided over a controversial issue and it can provoke strong emotions and protests. Controversial issues may deal with what has happened, with the causes of a situation, with the right response to it and with the possible effects of it. Controversies are complex and require knowledge and self-awareness. Balance is also important, showing personal commitment and objectivity, while taking a stand without pressure or indoctrination.

Reflective dialogue

A discussion about a controversy can be defined as a 'reflective dialogue' between students, or between students and teachers, or between colleagues, on a topic about which there is disagreement. The discussion can be triggered by an incident, a question or a statement from a student or a teacher on a social issue. The resulting dialogue can be used to set out evidence and comments and can express different points of view. A 'reflective dialogue' triggers listening and responding to ideas from non-congenial people. It is important to note that leaving controversies undiscussed can make one or more people feel uncomfortable. The reflective dialogue is helpful in making these feelings manageable.

Differences between dialogic and debate

Dialogue		Debate
What is really important?	Core question	Which views will stand up? Which will not?
Principles, norms and values	Discussion theme	Standpoints and arguments
What should outweigh? Hierarchy of principles, Norms and values	Result	What exactly is the problem? Separate main and side issues Filter out fallacy Decision
Understanding	Attitude of participants is geared towards	Convincing
Taking flight in rhetoric and woolly talk	Risk	To be proved right becomes more important than being right, Mock consensus

Practical points requiring attention in a team

There are events that can already cast a shadow and that you can therefore prepare for as a team. In this case, it is useful to discuss the following points together:

1. Make time and space available to discuss the topic and/or the conflict situation or the issue in the team, the classroom, and the school as a community.
2. Discuss in advance what the school policy is and how this affects the current topic (which way of reacting and responding). The RUAS Code of Conduct and Integrity states the following:

“In its activities, the Stichting Hogeschool Rotterdam (foundation) assumes the equality of people; in the recruitment and selection of staff and in the admittance of students, no distinction is made on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, religion or philosophy of life, cultural background, or skin colour. The foundation promotes mutual respect. It strives for philosophical multiformity and encounters, with students

being divided into groups solely on educational grounds. The foundation works in an emancipatory way (in the broadest sense of the word) and with respect for democratic relations. " RUAS thus embraces the diversity in Rotterdam.

We respect each other's opinions and values and enter into dialogue together. Violence and to threaten violence is unacceptable.

3. Make sure you are well prepared. Collect background information beforehand and visualise how students think about the (initial) situation and the occasion. Also pay attention to multicultural aspects, religious beliefs, and social environments of students.
4. First talk about what is going to be discussed in the team, the possible dilemmas and the possible method(s) and form(s) in which discussions should be conducted. Be aware of your own assumptions. Discuss this as well.
5. If necessary, ask for support from teachers and team(s) and let each other help and exchange experiences. Organise one or more moments where staff can 'blow off steam'.
6. A tried and tested method of discussion is the LSD method; listening, summarising and discuss further. It is about guiding the conversation professionally and teaching students to think.
7. In the class and/or didactically sound discussion, first pay attention to the students' own feelings.
8. Don't set the bar too high. Changing each other's points of view is not realistic. It is about exchanging and understanding views and opinions.

Heated discussion

A discussion about a social or critical event can sometimes arise spontaneously in a class or group (also via social media, for example, in an app group) and then sometimes seem to explode in the classroom. The challenge is to use these moments and to look for learning opportunities in the process.

- What is your own point of view as a teacher and educator? Know yourself, know how you can be affected and think about how you will deal with this in your role as process facilitator.

- Be firm and bring structure to the conversation.

- Do not take comments personally (attacks are often aimed more at your role as a teacher than at you yourself).

Realise that you are a representative of Hogeschool Rotterdam, so know the institution's position on difficult issues.

Points requiring attention in the classroom

Some practical tips for dealing with 'critical moments' in a classroom situation

- Do not present opinions as facts.
- Let different points of view come from the group.

- Present yourself as a teacher, not as an authority who is 'in the know'. Be careful with points of view and keep the RUAS principles in mind.
- Listen carefully.
- Ask for clarification.
- Correct factual errors during discussions.
- Pay attention to content and behaviour and do not make it a personal issue for an individual or group(s).
- Try to gain respect for each other's points of view and for minority opinions, teach the participants how to deal with differences.
- Avoid an us-versus-them situation, ensure a broad dialogue, tolerance and understanding.
- Ask critical questions when consensus is reached too quickly. Then ask questions and look for subtle distinctions.
- Determine and monitor the boundaries of the conversation (avoid stigmatisation, racist statements, deliberate insults, intimidation of others; clearly indicate where the boundaries lie).
- Understand what young people say to each other and what they actually mean; listen to the concerns of students. A "crude" remark may reveal a deeper concern. Try to bring that out.
- Try to get students to understand that primary reactions often do not achieve anything; exchanging pain for pain escalates; doubting is not weak; hatred does not only consume the other person but also yourself; you can be carried away by the emotions of others.
- Avoid fighting conversations right from the start. When there is excessive shouting (e.g. from students), focus on the content.
- Teach the participants to use information critically, by comparing different sources (such as experts and academics) and by researching the backgrounds of international conflicts.
- It is important that, as a teacher, you allow all points of view to be heard.
- Emphasise that conflicts/controversies are opportunities to learn and grow.
- Make sure that the group parts well, check that with a few questions.
- Share the results of the classroom discussions with other team members and, if necessary, discuss how to follow up.

Additional information

The 'Platform Integrale Veiligheid Hoger Onderwijs' (platform for comprehensive safety in higher education) has, in cooperation with the Rotterdam municipal authority, created a reference index in which you can also find instruments that are helpful in making difficult subjects discussable in the classroom, for example, with regard to sensitive issues, discrimination, diversity, social unrest.

Accountability

This document is an adaptation of 'Controversial and emotional encounters in the classroom' by ROC TOP on behalf of Hogeschool Rotterdam, with the author's permission.

Source

Kees van Eerten (2015), *Controversiële en emotionele onderwerpen in de klas*. ROC TOP, Amsterdam.