



Activity:

What are controversial issues and how do they make us feel?

*This activity is originally from the training pack *Living with Controversy - Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE)*, (Council of Europe, 2016 p. 40-41).*

For the Thorvald Stoltenberg Seminar 2020, we adapted the exercise for use online and for the target group of the seminar.

Aims:

- To explore the emotive nature of controversial issues and its implications for dialogue
- To explore different factors that make issues controversial, and how these can be heavily dependent on context

Time: 30 minutes

Number of participants: 15 – 30

Tools and method:

- Use a platform that allows you to share your screen and participants to write on it. We used Zoom and the built-in annotate-function. Alternative tools are Miro or Jamboard.
- A tool that allows participants to brainstorm controversial issues. We used www.mentimeter.com and the feature for open-ended questions.

Preparations:

- Prepare the tool you will use for the brain storming. If you choose to use www.mentimeter.com: Make a presentation and choose the function “Open-ended questions” and fill in the question “What are controversial issues?”. Choose the preferred result layout, for example “flowing grid”. Make sure you tick of the box “Let participants submit multiple times”.
- Think through: Which issues do you think the group find controversial? What will they write during the brainstorming? In the first part of the activity, participants will write down issues they find controversial. You can use these issues as a basis for part 2 of the activity, or you can prepare some statements on beforehand.
- Google “Zoom Whiteboard” or “Zoom Annotation” for instruction videos on how to use these functions. The best way of learning is to try it out yourself beforehand. Invite a colleague or a friend to practice using the tools, before the training.

Controversial issues are issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society

Instructions:

Part 1: Brainstorming

1. Introduce the session, for example by giving a definition of controversial issues. In Teaching Controversial Issues (p. 8), it is defined as “Issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society”. Explain that in this session participants will explore what make some issues more controversial than others, the emotive nature of these issues and what implications it might have for dialogue.
2. Explain that we will start by brainstorming on what controversial issues are. The concrete task is to formulate, as very short statements, an issue, case, or example of something that is controversial in society. You can emphasize that this task has no correct answer, it is entirely up to the participants themselves and what they find controversial. All the contributions will be anonymous.
3. Ask the participants to access www.menti.com, type in the code for your presentation and write down a couple of issues that they find controversial.
4. As soon as a few issues have been registered, you can share the screen with the results.
5. You can let the results hover on your screen a little, and let participants read for themselves. Read a couple of issues out loud, and use them as the basis for some reflections on what controversial issues are, for example:
 - a. What we see as controversial might vary between people, over time and across countries.
 - b. Different factors might contribute to making an issue controversial, such as media, recent events, political climate.

What are controversial issues?

Mentimeter

The screenshot displays a grid of nine boxes, each containing a controversial issue. The issues are: Abortion, Topics which create heated debate due to opposing views, Black lives matter in Norway, The Palestina and Israel conflict, Israel Palestine conflict, Immigration, Animal rights vs. eating and consuming products from animals, Vaccines, and Cultural Differences & Barriers, Cultural Assimilation and Integration.

Screenshot, showing some of the controversial issues that came up at the Thorvald Stoltenberg Seminar.

Part 2: Hot or cold?

1. Explain that you have chosen a few of the issues as the basis for statements that you will show one by one. Participants will be asked to position themselves along a scale between “Cold” and “Hot” according to how comfortable they are discussing an issue. “Cold” means that you are completely comfortable talking about the issue and listening to someone else’s views. Hot means you are completely uncomfortable. In between are various, smaller degrees of comfort or discomfort.
2. If you are using Zoom, you can share a PowerPoint or use the built in Whiteboard-function. Make a scale between “Cold” and “Hot” on your whiteboard/PowerPoint, pose one statement at the time and ask the participants to position themselves along the scale by annotating on the screen. When all the participants have put their stamp on the screen, you can save the annotation and erase all the stamps. Then you can pose a new statement on the screen. Continue this way, until you have covered all the statements.
3. Questions for debrief:
 - a. What did you feel during this activity?
 - b. What makes some of the issues more challenging than others?

Tips

1. At the Thorvald Stoltenberg Seminar, we used the “Stamp” tool. By using this tool, the participants are anonymous during the activity. This way, one can ensure that participants feel safe to express their opinion, also online, with limited time for building a safe space, for discussion and debrief. Alternatively, the “Arrow” tool can be used, in which the names of the participants are visible.
2. Participants that are using Zoom through a web browser on their computer, or who are using a phone or a tablet, might have difficulties annotating. Tell participants that struggle, that they can send a private message in the chat to one of your trainer-colleagues, who will annotate on behalf of them. They can write a number between 1 and 5, where 1 equals cold and 5 equals hot.
3. You might want to document the results of this activity. When using the annotate-function in Zoom, it is possible to save the annotations to your computer by pressing the “Save” button in the upper left corner.

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Screenshots, showing some of the statements and participants' positions at the Thorvald Stoltenberg Seminar.

Suggestion

At the Thorvald Stoltenberg Seminar 2020, this activity was concluded by a short PowerPoint presentation on the following questions:

- How can we define controversial issues?
- Why are controversial issues so challenging to discuss?
- Why address controversial issues?
- How to address controversial issues?

Having short presentations in between the participatory activities might be a good variation, not to “exhaust” the participants.

In the section of this publication about “Discussing controversial issues online” and in the training pack *Living with Controversy - Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE)* you will find all the information you need if you wish to make a similar presentation.