# DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

## MANUAL FOR THE TRAINING OF PROFESSIONALS
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**Dealing with controversial issues, manual for the training of professionals**

**Authors:**
**Bart Van Bouchaute and Reyhan Görgöz, Artevelde University of Applied Sciences**
**John Webster and Charlie Pericleous, Portsmouth City Council**

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**The ORPHEUS – Consortium**
**City of Mechelen – Belgium**
**Portsmouth City Council – United-Kingdom**
**University of Portsmouth – United-Kingdom**
**Artevelde University of Applied Sciences – Belgium**
**Greta Grand Littoral – France**
**Ceapire – Belgium**
**University College Roosevelt – The Netherlands**
**Contourdetwern – The Netherlands**



**Project Management and secretariat**
Project Manager: Hilde Lauwers, hilde.lauwers@mechelen.be
Administrative and financial expert: Kathy Marivoet, Kathy.marivoet@mechelen.be

# Table of Contents

# 1 **Introduction**

## What is the aim of this training?

In this training course on 'dealing with controversial issues', we want to think and develop possibilities and methods on how to deal with foreseeable and unforeseeable controversy in planned and unplanned moments of activities, conversations and discussions. We aim at providing professionals with tools to deal with different kinds of situations with the intention of 'turning a difficult seemingly destructive conversation and processes into a constructive one, constructive learning moments and a broadly open climate in dealing with young people'[1]. The general objectives of this training are:

| GENERAL OBJECTIVES |
| --- |
| <ul><li>Professionals are aware of the importance of installing safe spaces for young people and professionals</li><li>Professionals feel more confident in dealing with controversial issues.</li><li>Professionals can assess what topics are difficult and sensitive to discuss with a group of young people</li><li>Professionals are aware of the own perspective, own approach and own reactions in dealing with controversial issues.</li><li>Professionals can set up ground rules in a group before starting discussions.</li><li>Professionals can use supportive discussion and questioning techniques in dealing with controversial issues.</li><li>Professionals can take the role as a facilitator of difficult discussions amongst young people</li></ul> |

Indirect benefits of this training for young people:

Although the training is intended for professionals like teachers and youth workers, we would like to underline its importance and opportunities for young people. In general, it stimulates creativity, critical thinking, conflict management, and digital and information competences. The cultivation of a taste for debate and the exploration of difference has multiple benefits that are worthy elements on their own. Dealing with controversial issues gives us opportunities to develop them.

[1] Van Alstein, M. (2018), p 59.

By facilitating difficult discussions among young people, they succeed in finding, sharing information in an informal setting, assessing its truthfulness and critically reviewing their own information. Additionally, young people might learn to share their own opinions, to argue with a view to convincing others, to take a perspective and to enter into a constructive dialogue with those who think differently. Young people become aware of the fact that differences of opinion are not problematic and can even be enriching. They can learn that difference leads to an exchange of opinions, enrichment and creativity in thinking. Critical thinking allows young people to be more self-confident, independent and to participate in debate.

The more the professional gives space for conversation and discussion in a constructive setting, the more skilled young people become in this. Young people can take this important learning experience to other (more formal) contexts and in their contribution to wider society.

| **KEY TOPICS** |
| --- |
| <ul><li>How do young people and professionals define safe spaces?</li><li>What is controversy and what does it mean for teachers and youth workers, young people, organisations and the wider society?</li><li>What attitude and roles are appropriate in dealing with controversy?</li><li>How to deal with sudden controversy in a group of young people?</li><li>How to set up a structured debate with a group of young people?</li><li>How to assess and manage polarisation in a group?</li></ul> |

The objectives for the four main topics in the training are:

| **KEY OBJECTIVES ON INSTALLING SAFE SPACES** |
| --- |
| <ul><li>Professionals define spaces where there is a safe climate for young people and professionals</li><li>Professionals install safe spaces to discuss controversial issues</li></ul> |

| **KEY OBJECTIVES ON ACTIVELY ADDRESS CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES** |
| --- |
| <ul><li>Professionals evaluate the (dis)advantages of different reactions in dealing with controversy.</li><li> Professionals reflect on the pros and cons of avoiding controversial issues.</li><li>Professionals recognise good reasons for actively addressing controversial issues.</li><li>Professionals can use questions to slow down whilst thinking on an adequate reaction.</li></ul> |

## KEY OBJECTIVES ON DEALING WITH SUDDEN CONTROVERSY

- Professionals feel more confident in dealing with sudden controversy.
- Professionals are aware of the balance between limiting statements and inviting for dialogue.
- Professionals develop criteria to assess if statements are (in)acceptable.
- Professionals can limit unacceptable statements whilst inviting for further dialogue.
- Professionals can use questioning and discussion techniques in dealing with sudden controversy.

## KEY OBJECTIVES ON DEALING WITH STRUCTURED DEBATE

- Professionals can establish a set of ground rules to guide the discussion.
- Professionals recognise the importance of facilitating a discussion.
- Professionals acknowledge that they bring attitudes and assumptions to a discussion.
- Professionals know that they can interchange between different facilitating roles.
- Professionals acquire skills in managing discussions.
- Professionals can draw on stock phrases and scripts to help facilitate discussions.

## KEY OBJECTIVES ON DEALING WITH POLARISATION

- Professionals reflect on negative but also possible positive ideas on 'polarisation'.
- Professionals can value a degree of polarisation with oppositional positions as functional and even necessary to open up debates in a vital democracy as opposed to a harmful social polarisation.
- Professionals can recognise signals that distinguish fierce debates from negative social polarisation.
- Professionals can choose for a different response on controversy vs. polarisation.

# How to use this training manual?

**Target group:**
The training manual is designed for trainers that develop training for professionals working with young people. With this manual you can develop training for professionals in different functions such as youth workers or teachers, working with young people in formal or informal contexts. It is important that this training is not designed to be delivered «Top Down», but in co-creation with participants on issues such as establishing ground rules and deciding on topics for discussion. It is important that this training is delivered with the support of the relevant organisation. The current local political climate and sensitivities should be considered when delivering the training. Trainers may also want to signpost practitioners to national guidance. In a UK context there is guidance on political impartiality. Political impartiality in schools - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

**Extra material available:**
In addition to the information in this manual, there is extra material that will be of pedagogical use. In the first place the PowerPoints to which we will refer from time to time in this manual. There are also additional documents with information about the questionnaire, the method of a focus group discussion, the Blob tree, …

**Resource pack:**
One of these materials is the resource pack. This document contains practical tips and advice that will raise the confidence of professionals in dealing with controversial issues with young people. It will be handed on to trainees after they finish their training.

**Flexible use:**
This training includes information, methods and exercises to work on dealing with planned and unplanned moments of controversy with young people. Although the exercises are hands-on, there are many other ways of approaching the training than the ones suggested. . You may wish to deliver this training over multiple blocks or sessions, depending on local context, the timing and the space. Therefore, it is up to you as a trainer to browse the manual and use parts separately and/or in a unique combination. In this sense, the training is a receptacle for pick and choose parts. The proposed way of working is exemplary. Feel free to make your own assessment and use, skip and combine parts in a way that is useable, adapted to the setting, time, context, needs, expertise, … Finally, please consider delivering this training over a number of sessions or opportunities depending on your local context. There is enough content and material to make this a series of lessons that could easily form part of a curriculum of scheme of work.

**Closing of the session:**

With this manual you can compile a program for a few hours, half a day or several days of training. In any case, it is important that closure is provided at the end of the training. That is why we provide a closing section for the various topics. This addresses to the need of voices being heard and topics being tackled. There should be an opportunity for follow-up or supervision if required. Equally important is the opportunity for the trainer to reflect and consider the interactions from the session. Regular supervision is encouraged.

**No cookbook:**

We don't work with a cookbook that contains 'the' menu for dealing with controversies. There are different well-founded opinions about dealing with controversy and we want to respect that plurality. We do, however, want to provide pedagogical guidelines that increase the capacity of professionals to act in difficult situations.

**Context matters:**

We tried to make the training context proof by offering a variety of methods and examples. As a trainer, we encourage you to interpret and adapt the materials and resources to fit within your local and national context. We also acknowledge that some references or examples may become dated, again please replace with something more relevant. Even better, seek the views of the young people you work with as they will probably have the most up-to-date viewpoint.

The closing and safeguarding part at the end of the proposed training, and a resource pack for professionals are tools to facilitate this translation.

**Work in progress:**

There is no quick fix and the proposed approach is not intended to be the only one possible. The more you use the training in practice, the more experience you build up and the better the exercises will work. A one-time training on such a topic should be seen as a start for further trainings, programs or try-outs with young people. Again we urge trainers to consider using the materials to create a program of delivery over a number of sessions.

**Links with other Orpheus Training Packages:**

We consider the area of Controversial Issues as an umbrella for further related training such as Strengthening Personal Safety.

**Links with the local context:**

The training can support local policies and legislation on safeguarding young people and meeting educational responsibilities.

We hope this training course results in professionals being able to change the culture of discussions and strengthen young people with the skills to think, evaluate and form their own ideas.

# Why this training manual?

**Controversy as a challenge for professionals**

Controversy is in fact inevitable and is closely related to conflicts and tensions in society[2]. But dealing with controversy is not only a broad social issue but often a very concrete and practical pedagogical one. Professionals can proactively discuss the tensions in society with young people, but sometimes confronting or even hateful statements emerge in the group of youngsters.

Bringing in these tensions in the group is a real challenge for those who work with young people in class or in their free time. In order to arrive at a pedagogically responsible way of handling, the professional must quickly make an assessment on the statement itself and on the dynamics in the group. On the basis of such assessments professionals do make the choice to discuss a certain topic. If the topic is introduced by young people, they have to decide very quickly to address the situation or to avoid it (temporarily)? It may make sense to end the controversy and restart it later, particularly to ensure safety in the group. But it is not advisable to systematically avoid these situations, as they can lead to a lack of trust and credibility in the professional.

**Dealing with controversy: a positive approach in a vital democracy**

With this training, we see controversy not only as a problem. After all, dealing actively with controversy also has advantages for young people growing up in a vital democracy. Controversy and allowing controversy are part and parcel of a democratic society. Moreover, scientific literature provides evidence that it does have an effect if teachers and schools are able to approach controversy and polarisation in a proper manner[3]. By giving room for discussion on controversial issues, young people are able to deal with dissensus and develop democratic attitudes and skills. In some interesting research on Prevent and Professionals Confidence, Thomas and others [4] concluded that there was a distribution of confidence in staff that teach subjects that cover 'difficult conversations' as part of their curriculum.

By proactively and openly dealing with and discussing controversy, educators and youth workers are signaling that they are available and accessible and open to difficult topics. This could have resonance with other less broadcast and more personal issues. By being open to controversial topics, they are messaging that challenging subjects are not necessarily off limits. This has safeguarding implications.

2 Based on Van Alstein, M. (2018).
3 Van Alstein (2018), o.c., p. 59.
4 Busher, J., Choudhury, T., Thomas, P., Harris, G. (2017).

**Professionals need support**

Professionals often feel insecure and/or incompetent to handle this type of discussions. Various studies[5] have indicated that professionals need support in at least four key elements:

- maintaining a relation of trust and confidentiality with the young people
- coping with their own lack of confidence
- dealing with the question 'what is negotiable and what isn't?' in discussing controversial issues
- seen to be taking the issue seriously, and that a 'dialogue orientated approach' can be interpreted as condoning certain attitudes.

That is why in this training we will address some central issues in dealing with controversies in a group, for both formal (like during class) and informal (like during leisure time activities, youth work, sports…) contexts. In both cases planned/unplanned controversy can happen.

With this training we want to contribute to the concrete demand for approach. To this end, we bring two tracks together:

- information from literature, research and existing training courses
- practical wisdom of professionals working with young people in formal and informal contexts, collected in the Orpheus' network of pilots in four countries.

**Conclusion**: the purpose of this training is not to prescribe the professional 'the' correct approach, that ideal circumstance and ideal or safe approach does not exist. However, the intention is to offer a few tools to build up experience with an open mind in a safe space with the opportunity for learning and development.

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[5] Van Alstein, M. (2018).

## SAFEGUARDING

In difficult discussions it is important to safeguard both the youngsters and the professionals. See also the part on 'safe space' in this training (p 21).

**Safeguarding the young person:**
The aim of the training is to discuss controversial or sensitive topics in a safe environment. The establishment of ground rules is essential to facilitate a healthy and safe debate. On occasions, it may be necessary to offer one-to-one support or discuss further outside of the group setting, especially if concerns are raised. Educators or youth workers should use their professional judgement and follow their setting's safeguarding procedures and consult with safeguarding lead for further support and guidance. In the UK, the key statutory guidance is Keeping Children Safe in Education and Working Together to Safeguard Children.

**Safeguarding the professional:**
We need to address the role of the professional within the training and consider what support and safeguarding that they may need. The institutional setting needs to have clear guidelines on how professionals can deliver such sessions within a supportive framework.

- Opportunity for supervision to share what has taken place
- Regulation on young people's actions (post discussion)
- Code of Conduct for the setting (professionals and young people)

# 2 Training program: overview

This is a proposal on how to conduct a training course on 'controversial issues'.
We propose to work in **3 phases**: a preparation before the training, one or more training moments and a follow-up after the training.

For each phase we propose **3 possibilities:**
a minimal ('small'), a more elaborated ('medium') and a maximal ('large') way.

For all phases together, this results in **a matrix with 9 possibilities** depending on the time you have for the training.

Feel free, make your own assessment to use it as it is proposed or skip things and make your own compilation of elements in this manual. After all, every context, every group of professionals requires a slightly different approach. With this manual you have the possibility to pick and mix sections from the matrix so that it is tailored to every setting and the time allowance.

| | Preparation | Training | Follow-up |
|---|---|---|---|
| **S** | **10min**<br><br>Questionnaire | **15-30min**<br><br>Introduction on how to deal withcontroversial issues | **10min**<br><br>Follow-up questionnaire |
| **M** | **40min**<br><br>Questionnaire<br>+<br>Personal reflection on past experiences with controversial issues | **120-180min**<br><br>Introduction<br>+<br>A selection of possible topics:<br>1. Safe space<br>2. Why actively address controversial issues?<br>3. Dealing with sudden controversy<br>4. Dealing with controversy in astructured debate<br>5. What if polarisation dominatesthe group?<br>+<br>Closing of the session | **40min**<br><br>Follow-up questionnaire<br>+<br>Extra exercises and signposts |
| **L** | **90min**<br><br>Questionnaire<br>+<br>Personal reflection on past experiences<br>+<br>Discussion on thesereflections in focus groups | **+300min**<br><br>Introduction<br>+<br>More topics (see list medium)<br>+<br>Closing of the session | **+60min**<br><br>Follow-up questionnaire<br>+<br>Participation in supervision groups |

# 3 Preparation

## Approach

Before the training starts, not only the participants but also the trainer must be well prepared. So in this part we first give some possibilities for the trainer to clarify the needs and questions of the group that will be trained. Then we give some suggestions for the preparation of the professionals who will participate in the training.

## Preparation of yourself as the trainer

Before starting the training for professionals, think about the following questions:

**On the 'who'**
- Who are the professionals who will attend the training?
- Did they decided themselves to attend the training?
- Which professional role(s) do they have in supervising young people?
- Asses the needs of participants for a training in this topic by contacting the organisation /professionals.
- Asses how much experience the professionals have with controversial issues.

**On the 'safe context' for this training**
- Think about ways to install a safe climate for the training
- Do the trainees know each other?
- Is the location where the training will be held 'neutral/safe'?
- What about what trainees will share in the training – think about installing rules in the group such as 'what is said here remains here'.
- Will you share information of the training with supervisors?

During periods in which various events take place, such as the beheading of a French teacher after showing Mohamed cartoons, such as a terrorist attack or extreme-right attacks on refugees,... there are other questions and concerns from professionals to deal with than other periods. In this sense, it is important to pay attention to the current context at the time a training is given.

**On the 'format of the training'**

• How much time professionals have for this training – adapt the version of the preparation, training and follow up to the time limit and inform the trainees on this.

• How much live interaction is possible and how can this be combined with forms of online training/interaction?

**On the 'I' as a trainer**

• How do you think the group perceives you?

• How is your relationship with the participants?

• What is your perception of a good trainer?

• How confident are you about (some of) the topics proposed in this training?

# Preparation of trainees

The aim of this phase is to let participants reflect on past experiences with controversy in their groups and in their professional life and to gather information/cases to work with in the face-to-face training. This can be done in a 'small', 'medium' and 'large' way.

### Small-Medium-Large

The questionnaire below would be put to professionals participating in the training course 'Dealing with Controversial Issues'.

**HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU IN YOUR ABILITY TO….**

1. be an effective facilitator for discussions about controversial issues?
2. assess and handle appropriately the difference between heated discussionand negative polarisation?
3. set up a constructive dialogue among young people on sensitive topics?
4. develop a safe space for discussions among youngsters?
5. manage heated discussions with youngsters?
6. keep the balance between free speech and respect for each other duringdiscussions of controversial issues?
7. set productive ground rules with youngsters for discussions about controversialissues?
8. ask the right questions in order to present issues fairly in the absence of neutral,balanced or comprehensive sources of information?
9. handle spontaneous questions and remarks of a controversial nature?
10. reflect about what you bring to the discussion (e.g. your identity, opinions and biases) and assume a facilitation style that will allow participants to engage effectively?
11. select and implement appropriately according to circumstance a range of roles in dealing with controversy e.g. 'neutral chairperson', 'balanced' approach, 'devil's advocate' and 'stated commitment'?

The same questionnaire can be amplified with questions which aim at a personal reflection on past experiences with controversial issues.

Mail these questions to the participants. They are meant to introduce the topic and bring the participants in the right mindset. If you organise a focus group (see large version), the participants can use these questions as a preparation of the focus group. If you want to discuss these questions in the training, this is also possible.

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS**

1   What issues are controversial for you? For the young people you work with? For your organisation? For the broader society? Do you see big differences?

2   How safe is the climate for you as a professional to deal with controversy? Which support, or constraints do you experience?
How can you have/make a safer space in your professional context?

3   Choose a situation in which a controversial issue suddenly popped up in your group. Give a short description of the situation. How did you react?
How did the group react? How confident did you feel in dealing with controversial issues in this situation?

4   Did you ever introduce in your work with young people a controversial issue yourself? Give a short description of your approach. How confident did you feel in tackling this? How did the young people react?

In a maximal way you can prepare the reflections in focus groups. We propose the following methodology:

## Step 1

The coach writes 'What is a controversial issue?' on a flipchart and asks the participants to write an answer in the form of a keyword on a post-it. Then they are asked to stick their post-it on the flipchart and give some explanation. The coach asks the participants
whether other participants have given the same answer, and whether the own meaning of a controversial issue is the same as that of the organisation/young people/the wider society. The focus of the group discussion is on differences in meaning from various parties involved. This group discussion lasts 20min. The coach is responsible for creating a safe space environment and for leading the discussion.

## Step 2

The objective of the next exercise is to share personal reflection on past experiences with difficult discussions. The questions in de M size of the preparation are sent to all the participants. They prepare themselves for a focus group by answering the questions and bring it with them.

**Part 1**: Individual preparation at home

The participants work individually on the following questions

1. What issues are controversial for you? For the young people you work with? For your organisation? For the broader society? Do you see big differences?
2. Choose a situation in which a controversial issue suddenly popped up in your group. Give a short description of the situation. How did you react? How did the group react? How confident did you feel in dealing with controversial issues in this situation?
3. Did you ever introduce in your work with young people a controversial issue yourself? Give a short description of your approach. How confident did you feel in tackling this? How did the young people react?

**Part 2**: Discussion in small groups of 3 participants (30min)

Each participant brings his or her individual preparation and shares his or her answers with others.
The exercise starts with dividing roles: one is the interviewer, the second is the interviewee and the third is a reporter.

The interviewer asks the interviewee one of the next questions:
Describe a discussion you had with young people
OR
Describe a situation in which a controversial issue suddenly popped up in the group
OR
Describe a situation in which you introduced a controversial issue yourself in a group

The role of the interviewer is to ask questions in order to gain insight in how the situation went, how the supervisor approached the situation and what she/he is satisfied/not satisfied with.
The reporter fills in a document using key words (to use in step 3). If there is enough time, the participants change roles, someone else shares answers, another person is the interviewer and a new reporter fills in the form with questions.

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**Step 2: Form to fill in**


Description of the situation
(planned, unplanned, setting, topic, circumstances, type of young people ,...)


………………………

How did the discussion go?
(How did you react as a professional? How did the young people react? Whatwent well? What worked? What can you improve? What made you insecure?


………………………

What could make me more confident in guiding difficult conversations withyoung people?


 …………………………

What kind of discussions do you prefer?
(planned structured debates or unplanned discussion? Why?)


…………………………

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**Step 3**

This is a plenary session with the focus on gathering information about the degree of trust the professionals have in their own approach and possible questions to work on
during the training. (40min)

The trainer hangs up 4 empty sheets with on each sheet one of the following phrases:
- I feel uncertain in guiding difficult discussions because …
- What I believe will work in guiding difficult discussions is …
- What I think makes me more confident in guiding difficult discussions is …
- I would prefer planned discussions because …
- I like to accompany unplanned discussions because …

Each person who has taken the role of a reporter in step 2 uses the information of the form to write key words on the sheets. Other participants can add extra information on the sheets. After this is finished, the supervisor goes over the information and discusses the content with the whole group. If possible, he makes links to what follows during the training.

In the next phase, the face-to-face training, the supervisor can refer to the information on the sheets and continue to work on what came out of the discussion.

# 4 Training

## Small-Medium-Large

When you have only 15 to 30 minutes to speak with professionals, you will have to work out a **small** version. You can focus on presenting the resource pack and explain some highlights on dealing with controversy in youth groups.

A **medium** size face-to-face training can be used when you have 2 to 3 hours. After an introduction, you can choose some of the different topics and exercises we propose:

- Why actively address controversies?

- What to do if a controversial statement or attitude suddenly pops up in your group? This often happens in more informal settings, for instance in youth work.
- How can you bring in and structure a debate on a controversial issue?
- How can you assess and manage polarisation in your group?
  You can choose these exercises based on the specific questions of the group, the role and the professional context of the group of professionals (teachers, youth workers, ...) you work with

If you have more time, you can combine more parts of the training in a more intensive, **large** training program of one day or more. of one day or more.

# Introduction  (20min)

**Step 1: Introduction round**

The session starts with a round in which each participant tells who he is, what work he/she is doing and why he/she is participating in this training

**Step 2: Introduction to the topic of the training**

There are several ways to introduce the topic, depending on the way the preparation phase has been running. You can start discussing the questions participants have received by mail (see preparation in the L version). Another possible methodology is the Blob Tree.

Exercise: How confident are you in dealing with controversial issues? Where are you now in the tree and where do you want to be after the training? This exercise can be repeated after the training.

Another opportunity is to show the blob tree and ask the following questions:



(www.blobtree.com – 2005)

...are you when you work together with young people?

...represents you the last time you held a discussion with young people?

...do you think represents you according to what young people think of you?

...are you when it comes to holding difficult conversations with young people?

...is the Blob you've never been during discussion on difficult issues?

# Safe space: a necessity for addressing controversial issues (60-80min)

Dealing with controversial issues in a group/organization is not an isolated issue: what are the conditions for a safe climate for youth workers themselves, in their pedagogical relation with young people, and for the young people. This is an important steppingstone in this training before elaborating on other items like structured debate or dealing with controversial issues. In order to deal properly with controversy in guiding young people, it is important that this can be done in a safe climate. Discussion formulas or practical methods and skills to handle heated discussions will not help if the climate is not safe.

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**KEY OBJECTIVES ON INSTALLING SAFE SPACES**

- Professionals define spaces where there is a safe climate for young people and professionals.
- Professionals install safe spaces to discuss controversial issues.

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1. **Why is a safe space fundamental to dealing with controversial issues? 10'**

One of the main goals of the safe spaces approach is that delicate topics can be addressed comfortably with a positive pedagogical support as opposed to a disproportional repressive reaction, censorship or exclusion. Dealing soundly with controversy starts with an understanding of what a safe space can mean for young people.

A safe space can be described as, on the one hand, **a 'confined' space** where a lab is set up for learning experiences with a freedom of expression that is not always possible in the outside world. The safe space is also **a 'public' space** connected to the outside world, and in that sense the lab is never completely closed. All conflicts in society can just pop up in the safe space.

If you didn't have discussions yet about 'safe spaces' with professionals (how they see it, what the importance is for them…), you can make some 'space' for it now.

## 2. What makes the climate (more) safe for young people and professionals? 20'

Brief discussion in pairs: What makes the climate safe/unsafe, 1) for you asprofessional and 2) for young people?

Discussion in the group:

1. Safe space for the professional
• How important is a safe climate for yourself as a professional? What makes the climateunsafe for you as a professional?
• How can you deal with this? How can the climate become safer?
• What support do you need? Who can give it to you?

2. Safe space for young people:
• What makes the climate unsafe for young people? Here you can point to the double meaning of and the ingrained tension between two forms of safety: the safety of being able to make strong statements without repressive reaction on the one hand, the safety of not being humiliated or damaged as a young person on the other hand.
• How can you deal with this? How can you improve in supervising young people?
• What support do you need? Who can give is to you?

## 3. Case discussion 30'

In this case[6] we use an article on the recent murder of the French teacher Samuel Paty to start a discussion on the safe space for dealing with controversies from the position ofthe professional.

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[6] Beckers, L. (2020).

**2020, october 24**
**The murder of Samuel Paty**

Samuel Paty was a history and geography teacher in a high school in a quiet suburb of Paris. In a lesson in civics, introduced as a response to the attack on Charlie Hebdo's editorial staff on 7 January 2015, Paty showed early this month the now infamous caricatures of the prophet Mohammed published in the satirical weekly magazine. For a number of parents, Paty's didactic material shot down the wrong throat, causing commotion on social media. The teacher filed a complaint about threats. A few days later he was found decapitated. Seven people were arrested for the murder. In France, the teacher has now become a martyr for free speech.
In other western, democratic countries, too, dealing with controversial and polarising issues is increasingly part of the remit of teachers and youth workers. From discussions about the theory of evolution and girls who do not want to wash men during their internship in a nursing home to young people sticking Nazi symbols on the walls, the world has changed, and this has clearly affected the safe space of teachers and youth workers to deal with controversial issues.

«Free expression of opinion is an increasingly difficult topic to grasp in class,» says Christophe Busch, the former director of the Dossin Museum who now leads the Hannah Arendt Institute (Mechelen).

History teacher Soumaya El Allachi (Lyceum in Antwerp) describes her students as somewhat unworldly: «the we-they-think lives so strongly that everyone is, as it were, sitting in those camps, looking at the world from there. «When I was young was - I am now 36 - that polarisation did not play that way.»
El Allachi calls the 9/11 attacks the tipping point, even though the United States and Afghanistan were still far away physically and mentally. «Today those themes are much closer; 16 and 17 years-old in particular are working on them. I have also noticed that society has changed: just last week, my sister, who wears a headscarf, and I were scolded while shop- ping - in front of our children. I can give that a place for myself in the meantime, I know who I am, but children react with anger and frustration. It's a story of action and reaction, it comes from two sides."

Especially after the attack on Charlie Hebdo in 2015, some teachers were very shocked.
«I had only just started teaching, it was the very first time I had touched on such a the- me», says Dieter Vandenbroucke, who teaches history in third grade Technical education (Atheneum Mechelen. «That was a very difficult discussion. I remember it vividly: suddenly I heard sweet, intelligent pupils say things that seemed shocking to me. What also struck me was how pupils from all walks of life were influenced by conspiracy theories circulating on social media: there they collected all sorts of 'facts' as if it were a pantry from which they were free to choose».

According to Busch, the big problem is that the average teacher is a little scared of those themes: they are afraid of discussions, they cannot judge properly how these issues lie in the classroom or fear that they will be filmed will be. «They prefer to avoid the subjects, and that is the worst possible approach, certainly because there is now enough expertise in this area exists. » (...)

«A few years there was a great deal of panic about religious radicalisation in schools recently. Young people, now we see exactly the same thing with right-wing populism. And again, schools do not know what to do with pupils who are furious with Shield & Friends: they ignore the problem, or park it for the sake of convenience with the history teacher, who has to have it then on the Holocaust.

A totally wrong approach, according to Busch, because the tendency towards radicalisation is a characteristic of puberty. «But underneath it there are often very different problems". He advises schools to solve the problems who is leading these radical cliques, what is their story? «Often these are young people who are looking for attention or a clear position. I re- member such a boy: turned out to be in the middle of a difficult divorce situation and there was a problematic upbringing. But, for some reason, with these extremist young people the traditional care trajectories are not set in motion."

In discussing this article, you can use questions as:

- Which feelings are recognisable to you or those around you?
- How safe do you find the climate to work in?
- How do you react to this yourself, how does your professional environment react?
- What do you think of Busch's thesis that avoiding these controversies is not the best solution?
- What possibilities do you see?
- What support do you need?

## 3. Closing by the trainer

At the end of a training session, it is important to have a closing moment with the participants, to check if they feel listened to, if there are any questions left unanswered. Possible follow-up can be given... [hard return]

These are some of the possible questions you can use:
• Do you feel more comfortable dealing with this issue in your practice?
• Which elements from this training were very useful for your practice?
• What other questions and uncertainties do you have?
• What opportunities and limitations do you see now to use this in your professional context?

At the end of the training session, as a trainer you can also refer to other training coursesand to the supervision programs that are offered (see follow-up part in this training).

Specific for this topic the trainer can give some concluding remarks:
To ensure safety, it may be advisable to break off the conversation and set limits. You nip the discussion in the bud. However, it is best to avoid the conversation only temporarily. You can agree with young people that you will come back to it with them at a later moment. Your group is a safe space when it is clear that no one will be exposed to discrimination, negative criticism, intimidation and any other emotional or physical harm. This requires preparation and specific skills on the part of the teacher.

# Why actively address controversial issues? (60-80min)

Professionals working with young people sometimes prefer to avoid controversial issues. Sometimes it makes sense to end a controversy in order to restart the conversation later because of several reasons, for example to ensure safety in the group, or to organize a structured debate on the issue later. But it is not advisable to systematically avoid these situations, as this can lead to a lack of trust or credibility. In this section of the training we reflect on avoiding or addressing controversial issues and give some instructions in actively handling sudden controversy in working with youngsters.

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**OBJECTIVES**

1. Professionals evaluate the (dis)advantages of different reactions in dealing with controversy.
2. Professionals reflect on the pro's and contras of avoiding controversial issues.
3. Professionals recognise good reasons for actively addressing controversial issues.
4. Professionals can use questions to slow down whilst thinking on an adequate reaction

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*Here you can use the PowerPoint 'Controversial issues'.*

### 1. What options do professionals have in dealing with controversial discussions? 20'

Individual exercise: the participants are asked to think about possible reactions they can give to popped up or structured discussions.
Group discussion: the reactions are collected and listed in the group.

The trainer compares the list of reactions with information from literature. Generally speaking, four options are available to deal with confrontational remarks or heated discussions[7]. Teachers can:

- **Avoid**: ignore the inflammatory remark, abruptly break off the discussion, or exclude a young person from the class or activity.
- **Convince**: engage in a discussion by offering counterarguments and trying to convince young people of a different position or viewpoint.
- **Let them ventilate**: allow young people to vent their emotions without asking for further arguments;
- **Discuss**: listen carefully and ask open-ended questions in an effort to try and invite young people students to think about what they have said and to probe them for their underlying arguments, motives and needs.

[7] Van Alstein (2018).

Van Alstein[8] indicates that "none of these options is in itself 'good' or 'bad', and a lot depends on the specific situation that arises".

Then you can start a group discussion: which reaction is considered appropriate in which situation?

The trainer makes a board schedule with the 4 possible reactions and the advantages(+) and disadvantages (-) of each reaction.

## 2. What are (good) motives for avoiding controversial issues? 15'

At the start of this section you can immediately pick up some examples and reactions of the first exercise. Group discussion: the reactions are collected and listed in the group.

Group discussion: Which motives professionals have when avoiding this kind of situations?

• Mentimeter[9] or group discussion > visualize a list of motives
• Compare with motives from research (see p 41)
- Too little time
- Fear of loss of control
- Negative effect on participants
- Negative reactions from the environment
- Lack of knowledge or experience
- Lack of education and training
• What seem to be good reasons to end the controversy? Explanation of each participant and space for questions to each other

## 3. Why actively address controversial issues? 15'

Trainer: it is possible that there are good reasons to end the controversy in order to restart the conversation later, particularly to ensure safety in the group.

Individual reflection: what are in your view the most important reasons for actively addressing controversial issues with young people?

Group discussion:

• Mentimeter or group discussion > visualize the arguments
• Compare with reasons in research: what motives professionals express?
- 'it is formative for the role as citizens in pluralistic democracy'
- 'it sharpens critical awareness'
- 'it is good for their skills'

[8] Van Alstein (2018).
[9] www.mentimeter.com

**4.What can help to gain time to look for adequate answers? 10'**

Trainer: Some stock phrases can help to 'slow down' so that you gain time to look for adequate responses:

- What makes you say that?
- That's interesting, can you tell me some more about that?
- Do you know where that word comes from?
- That's not my experience of [group]
- What's your intention here?

This also is an opportunity for interaction: participants can be invited to add to this list, this list can never be too long…

With this type of resource, it can be useful to directly import some stock phrases that have been captured in sessional work, this gives them some form of 'evidence'. For example: "People have found that phrases like ……………………………………………………………………are useful."

**5.Closing by the trainer**

At the end of a training session, it is important to have a closing moment with the participants. These are some of the possible questions you can use:

• Do you feel more comfortable dealing with this issue in your practice?
• Which elements from this training were very useful for your practice?
• What questions and uncertainties are left unanswered?
• What opportunities and limitations do you see now to use this in your professional context?

At the end of the training session, as a trainer you can also refer to other training courses and to the supervision programs that are offered (see follow-up part in this training).

# Dealing with sudden controversy (110-140min)

The focus in this part of the training is on how to deal with sudden controversies that arise in working with young people. How to deal with such controversial statements? In order to arrive at a pedagogically responsible response, the professional must quickly make an assessment on the statement, the young person and the dynamics in the group. In one way or another, young people's supervisors must therefore be able to respond to such situations.

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**OBJECTIVES**

1. Professionals feel more confident in dealing with sudden controversy.
2. Professionals are aware of the balance between limiting statements and inviting for dialogue.
3. Professionals develop criteria to assess if statements are (in)acceptable.
4. Professionals can limit unacceptable statements whilst inviting for further dialogue.
5. Professionals can use questioning and discussion techniques in dealing with sudden controversy.

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*Here you can use the PowerPoint 'Sudden controversy'.*

### 1. How to handle the difficult tension between limiting or inviting for dialogue? 20'

What if a young person takes a very extreme position? What if the professional finds the young person's humiliating or hateful attitude unacceptable? Should the statement then be limited? What are the boundary zones? How can a professional indicate that a boundary has been crossed and yet continue to invite for conversation?

Here it is important that participants are aware not only of their own perspective and view, but also of:

•      The context/organisation where the controversy happens. Every context has his own formal/informal rules (see exercise).

•      The overarching aim to offer 'safe spaces' for young people (see Orpheus' background). You can use the ground rules elaborated in the exercise on a structured debate (see next part).

Exercise: Why limit statements?
Ask the participants to write down their point of view (see document):

•      Aggressive and hateful statements of young people must be limited by their supervisor (scale 1 – 5)

•      Motivate

Group discussion:

- Who wants to share some ideas > list motivations pro/contra.
- Discussion: What is the influence of the (in)formal rules on the position on limiting you can take? Are these rules (non) negotiable, by youngsters, by professionals, … and how? Here we talk about formal and informal rules in an organisation but also in e.g. street culture?

Compare with insights in literature and research. Experts and practitioners take different points of view:

- Some are reluctant to draw boundaries and block statements immediately, and certainly not to punish young people immediately. According to them, this attitude would only provoke more rebellion and close the dialogue.
- Others think it is a good idea to limit some of the statements. They see this as part of their pedagogical task to correct young people about the content and tone of their statements. A group in which no action is taken against hateful and aggressive statements can become a hostile, counterproductive and even harmful environment for pupils.

All stress very clearly that young people should be able to see that they are sincerely invited for further discussion.

Concluding remark of the trainer: this issue is in the heart of our understanding of 'safe spaces' for young people where they can express ideas, grievances in a safe

climate without counterproductive repressive reactions. This is not an easy challenge but in this training, we give you some support both in thinking and acting. In working with young people, instead of having strict 'boundaries' we work in 'boundary zones'.

**2. How to assess if statements are (un)acceptable? 20'**

• Introduction by the trainer
This issue remains ultimately a choice that teachers or youth workers and their organisations must make in specific situations. Therefore, no strict boundaries can be drawn, rather we can point to pedagogical 'border areas'.
• Sometimes professionals will find a statement absolutely unacceptable, for example because the basic rules of the organisation are compromised or because other young people feel hurt.
• In other cases, they will find that limiting statements will just be counterproductive, and that it is better to bring the young person to a more nuanced vision through a series of questions.

To support the workers in both cases, we will elaborate on both in the following parts of the training.

Exercise on 'border areas'

To navigate well in these border areas, teachers and youth workers must know their group and the needs of the individuals to a certain degree.
Here the trainer can link to the pre-phase of the training (the exercise about the case): how well did you know the individuals and the group, did it help you to cope?
Sharing and discussing an experience/case is possible here.

Exploration of 'border areas'
•Question: what is for you a 'border area', where you would feel you have to intervene…
•Conversation in pairs – group discussion

Compare with research finding[10].
In literature we find a distinction in three possible border areas:

## 1. SOCIAL
This border area is defined by the basis of our democracy: freedom and equality. Statements that expressly contest or deny the basic freedom and equal rights of others are to be found in a border area. Racist or homophobic statements are clear examples.

## 2. SCIENTIFIC
This border area is defined by scientific knowledge on which there is consensus. There is less room for questioning well-founded scientific knowledge than for all kinds of issues on which there is more scientific doubt. This is a border area that we often enter in an educational situation, where actual scientific knowledge needs to be taught, with less room for controversy. Clear examples are global warming or the theory of evolution.

## 3. PEDAGOGICAL
This border area is linked to security in the group climate. There are two poles to this security: security to be able to express oneself freely without fear of negative consequences, and security not to be hurt or humiliated. A typical example is the free expression of statements about groups that are very offensive to young people belonging to that group

Questions:
• Do we recognize our border area's in these three types?
• Do you see other area's that just popped up in our discussion?

[10] Van Alstein (2018), p. 78-80.

**!** Concluding remark of the trainer

•These insights in 'border areas can help us to assess if statements are (un)Acceptable.
•In these three border areas, a neutral attitude on the part of the supervisor is not possible.
•In this training course, we will go deeper into the possibilities of dealing with this in a responsible manner.

See extra information and deeper discussion on the topic of polarisation

## 3. How to 'limit' certain statements? 40'

Introduction by the trainer
It is important when 'limiting' statements to invite the youngster immediately for further discussion. When supervisors limit young people, they have to keep in mind that they are teenagers or adolescents who are busy finding their own voice, their own opinions, their own place in the world… The group remains an educational space. This is where the real stakes lie in limiting these statements: do we contribute to an open and safe pedagogical climate?

3.A Group discussion

▸ Start with examples of unacceptable statements from real experience
• Use examples that have been told in the preparation or other parts of this training.
• Co-creation: you can ask the participants if they have been confronted with a young person who makes a statement that is absolutely unacceptable to them.
• These examples are listed.
• One clear example is chosen for further reflection.

▸ Individual reflection
• The instruction: what would you say and/or do to limit immediately that statement.
• Everyone quickly writes down one or more reactions that pop up spontaneously.

Group discussion:

Who wants to share some ideas > list reactions?

Discussion:

Some possible reactions are discussed.
- Put yourself in the place of the young person: what would they think and feel about this reaction? Would this reaction convince them to correct or limit the harmful reaction?
- What would be a possible alternative to achieve a better outcome?

During this discussion you can refer to the content of 'structured debate' e.g.setting ground rules.

Conclusion: we end this exercise with a list of useful stock sentences. Here againthere is room for interactivity and co-creation.

Some literal example sentences to use in limiting & inviting are shown in thePowerPoint:

I'd really like to talk to you about this, but I don't want you to use offensive or discriminatory words.

It hurts me to hear you talking about another young person this way. Try to put it another way and still say what you really want to say.

I'd like to discuss this further, but you know that word is not considered acceptable?

I would like to listen to you, but I won't be able if you use these words, which is a pity,because I think you have already given this matter some thought.

I feel very uncomfortable when you use those words, so you shouldn't do that. But now tell me what you think about this, what's important.

3.B Roleplay

This role-playing game is a more intensive exercise for learning to delimit unacceptable statements. This exercise allows you to try out your own reactions, to explore the reactions and emotions of the actors involved, to look for alternative ways of reacting together, to reflect on them, etc.

Role-playing can be very powerful if it is done in a safe environment and with the full agreement of the participants. It is therefore recommended to check this explicitly when organising the training and before effectively starting this activity.

Exercise: roleplay on how to limit certain statements within a safe climate[11] ?

▶ Examples of unacceptable statements from real experience

• Ask the group: give a few examples of completely unacceptable statements by young people that you have already experienced in your practice (you can also use examples that have been told in the preparation or other parts of your training).

• The examples are listed

▶ Instruction

• Three participants A, B & C are asked to leave the room. They are instructed that they will be confronted as 'supervisors' with someone who will make a statement that is absolutely unacceptable to them. Their instruction is to limit immediately that statement.

• Three participants D, E and F are 'youngsters'. They choose one of the statements that were listed by the group. They stay in the room. They will express this statement during the roleplay.

• The rest of the group is divided in two groups. One group observes the reactions of the 'youngsters', the other of the 'supervisors'.

▶ Roleplay:

• The 'youngsters' leave the room. They are asked not to discuss about their role with the 'supervisors' outside the room.

• A and D enter and the first role play starts. After a few exchanges this is stopped by the trainer.

• The same happens for the second and third role play with participants B/E and C/F.

▶ Discussion: The three role plays are discussed. Key words can be listed

• First the experiences and emotions of the 'youngster' are explored. What did they think and felt during the roleplays. In which situation did they feel best and why? When did they feel accepted, when rejected? What would convince them to correct or limit their harmful statements? Conversely, what would throw more oil on the fire?

• Then we listen to the 'supervisors'. What did they think and felt during their roleplay? What did they think and felt during the role play of their fellow supervisors?

• The participants who observed the youngsters add what they saw and heard.

• Same for the observers of the 'supervisors'.

• During this discussion you can refer to the content of 'structured debate' e.g. setting ground rules.

▶ Conclusion: we end this exercise with a list of useful stock sentences that were used during the roleplay, or that participants bring in (see list 3.A).

Here again there is room for interactivity and co-creation. Requests empower the person being asked, in that they have a sensation of status as they are asked to offer something and become a part of the dialogue/problem solving process.

[11] This exercise is based on Leon Meijs (2017).

## 4. Which discussion and questioning techniques can be supportive? 30'

Introduction by the trainer

If a supervisor chooses not to avoid or block a controversial statement but discusses it with young people individually or in a group, there are a few guiding principles and questioning techniques that are important. In this part of the training we will discuss these.

Exercise: case

Presentation of the case (of course you can develop another, adapted to the context of thetraining)

*During class, a student sits all the time nervously and excitedly shifting back and forth. On the moment when the teacher gives an overview of the different cultural backgrounds of the inhabitants in the city, the student bursts out: «How much longerare we going to close our eyes! These foreigners don't want to integrate at all, theyhave no respect for us, and certainly not for women»... (continues).*
*A girl with migrant roots throws her pen on the floor: "I'm tired of being accused all the time..."*
*Blames go back and forth (the 'other' is always addressed with 'you'), it gets worse and worse, until they both furiously run out of class. First one, then the other.*

- Individual:
How would you react when you have chosen to deal with the situation (and not to avoidor downplay it)?

- In group:
Discussion on possible reactions and approach of the young people individually or in thewhole class-group.

Then we return to the case
*When peace and quiet had returned, the teacher gave space to both students totell their stories. The deal was that both could tell their stories and there would be no judgment. The boy came with a personal story: "This weekend my girlfriend was harassed by a group of young people at the station." The girl also told some anecdotes from her personal life, which showed that she has very often was humiliated becauseof her migration background.*

Some guiding principles for discussion:

- Two by two discuss the question: What would you consider the most important principles to have a fruitful conversation on this issue? Which attitude of the supervisor, what kind of questions, how to start and end the conversation, ...
- Discussion in the group
- List and compare with some ideas of Democratische Dialoog[12].

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[12] Democratische Dialoog (2017).

> ▸ **Show respect** by listening carefully and sincerely, show this verbally and in your bodylanguage.
> ▸ **Ask more deeply**, ask for clarification, ask for underlying motives or arguments, question on which a statement is based, where the information was found
> ▸ **Take emotions seriously**, empathise and ask the other person: can you imagine that...?,but show the difference between emotional and rational arguments.
> ▸ **Promote nuance**, do not generally promote nuance yourself, ask who thinks differentlyand what would be the arguments for that?
> ▸ **Repeat and summarize**, this is how you bring clarity and rest in a conversation
> ▸ **Conclude the conversation reflectively**: summarise and ask what the most important insights were, which questions remain open, what expectations there are for a follow-up.

## 5. Closing by the trainer

At the end of a training session, it is important to have a closing moment with the participants. These are some of the possible questions you can use:

• Do you feel more comfortable dealing with this issue in your practice?
• Which elements from this training were very useful for your practice?
• What questions and uncertainties are left unanswered?
• What opportunities and limitations do you see now to use this in your professional context?

At the end of the training session, as a trainer you can also refer to other training courses andto the supervision programs that are offered (see follow-up part in this training).

# Dealing with controversy in a structured debate (140min)

In some situations, it is not convenient to immediately deal with controversial issues that arise, and it is therefore functional to put an end to a controversy in order to restart the conversation later. In this section of the training we give some instructions in ending the controversial issue that arise and some instructions on how to organize discussions on controversy with youngsters.

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**OBJECTIVES**

1. Professionals can establish a set of ground rules to guide the discussion.
2. Professionals recognise the importance of facilitating a discussion.
3. Professionals acknowledge that they bring attitudes and assumptions to a discussion.
4. Professionals know that they can interchange between different facilitating roles.
5. Professionals acquire skills in managing discussions.
6. Professionals can draw on stock phrases and scripts to help facilitate discussions.

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*Here you can use the PowerPoint 'Structured debate'.*

## 1. Establishing ground rules 10'

Introduction by the trainer
When working with young people on controversial issues, it is important to start with some 'ground rules'. The same goes for this training of teachers or youth workers. The ground rules should link and support the culture and ethos of the setting. They should also support the 'boundary zones for dialogue' that have been referenced in the earlier section of this manual.

Group discussion on the question 'what ground rules are important to a discussion?' Allow participants the opportunity to discussion informally in pairs and collect feed- back so that the responses can be discussed. The purpose of this activity is to model how important it is to co-create the foundations and guiding principles of the discussion.

A key component of the Orpheus Training is always to focus on co-creation with young people and we recommend wherever possible to elicit the views of those you are working with.

Compare with insights in literature and research.
Below is an example of some of the rules that could be included, however this could change depending on different settings and group dynamics.

- Respect the views and be tolerant of others.
- Listen and respond to the comment, not the person.
- Use the correct vocabulary and seek clarification if in doubt.
- Avoid making it about the person in the room.
- Keep the conversation within the room.
- Everyone has the right to be heard or refrain from speaking.
- Provide closure to the discussion.

## 2. Becoming the facilitator - moving between different roles 5'

Introduction by the trainer
Trainers, teachers and youth workers cannot be experts on every possible controversial issue and this is not always necessary to guide discussions amongst young people. Therefore, it is very important to foster skills to allow discussion to happen. This can be done by adopting a variety of different roles within the discussion rather than relying on one fixed approach. We are proposing that we shift away from the facilitator having to know all the facts or be the world's leading expert. That does not mean to say that discussions are not planned or that that there is no preparation and assessment of the needs of the young people involved. Instead we are advocating the acquisition of skills to steer and guide young people through a discussion. This may well include a variety of different approaches ranging from games, peer talk and the use of prompt sheets. This will be explained more fully in section 6 'what position to take?'.

### 3.What baggage do we bring? 10'

Introduction by the trainer
As professionals, we will bring with us our attitudes, assumptions and biases. These are part of our make-up and left unacknowledged can influence how we conduct discussions. Below is an extract that looks at any controversial viewpoint from different parts of your identity[13].

Individual exercise
The purpose of this activity is to make participants aware that they will bring biases to the discussion and this, if left unchecked can inhibit the ability to facilitate. It will also encourage them to see beyond their professional role. Each person will use the template below to consider what other aspects of their identity can influence how they feel about a particular issue. Other aspects of their identity can be included such as ethnicity, age, lifestyle choices, and member of a club or organisation.

Explore what makes you fearful about the issue from these different perspectives and also what makes you hopeful about the issue.
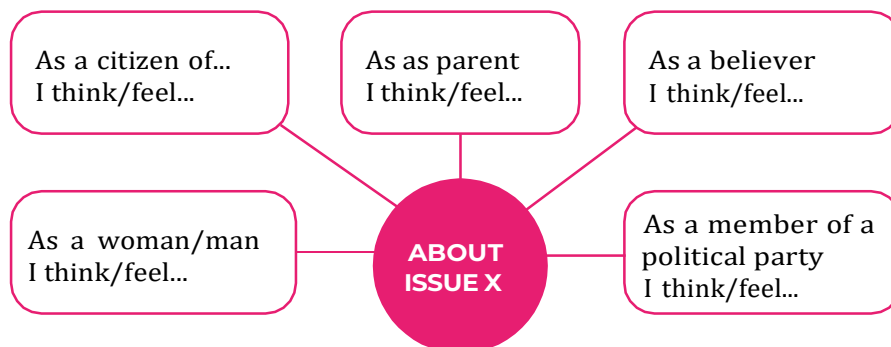


Feedback from activity
Individuals share how other parts of their identity can already have an impact on how they view a topic. At the end of this activity, participants will be asked to what extent they are im- partial. Some biases will be disguised or hidden and can be a challenge or uncomfortable to acknowledge for individuals. Through this activity, we raise awareness of what motivates our thoughts, how we have established values that will affect our views. The role of facilitator is complex and those who have an understanding of how viewpoints are formed or how they are embedded within us, will be in a strong position to guide young people through the discussion.

[13]Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (sd), p.33.

## 4. Self-assessment loop 5'

Introduction by the trainer
In preparation for this training course, participants completed a questionnaire. In this exercise, individuals have access to their questionnaires to ensure that the training is meeting their needs.

Individual exercise: take this opportunity to reflect on how you completed the questionnaire
- How confident are you to hold a discussion?
- Do you have the skills to facilitate a discussion?
- What resources do you need to prepare for discussions?

## 5. Discussion starter - what do we already know? 10'

Introduction by the trainer
We know that we have to acknowledge that our identity will bring certain attributes to the discussion, but our prior knowledge will also have an influence too. In what way?  Each individual will have a varying degree of knowledge and know some material to be authentic and some to be made-up.

Group discussion: using the prompts set out in Difficult Dialogue[14] apply these to controversial topics and explore what we already know and what is motivating our views.

|  |  |
|---|---|
| • Climate change<br>• Mask wearing for reducing infections<br>• Immigration<br>• Asylum support<br>• QAnon conspiracy theories | What I know about this issue that is true |
| | What upsets me about this issue |
| | What makes me proud or hopeful about this issue |
| | What I have heard about this issue and know to be false |
| | What I know to be true about this issue but I have some doubts |

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[14]Tony Blair Institute for Global Change Difficult (sd), p.46.

## 6. What position to take? - when to adopt a which role as a facilitator 20'

Introduction by the trainer
The challenge for the facilitator is what position to adopt in a discussion. This is mainly because research[15] shows that professionals feel that they can only allow discussions on a particular controversial topic if they have expertise on the subject. If this is not the case, they avoid it or ask an expert to take up his role. Although professionals mainly see the role of expert as an ambition to deal with controversy, there are many other roles that the professional can take on. In this next section, we will do an exercise on the 6 possible types or positions to take[16].

Group discussion Working with a peer

Annotate with post-It notes the answers to the following questions:
• What are the advantages and disadvantages of the 6 roles?
• Consider which type you have most experience with.
• Consider when you might use each of the 6 roles.
• Consider how the choice for a certain type vary with different groups.

Information on the 6 roles as a facilitator:
• Stated commitment
• Balanced
• Devil's Advocate
• Stated neutrality
• Ally
• Official Line

Feedback from activity
The purpose of this activity is to introduce participants to more than one role that the facilitator can take. To emphasise they are not fixed, that they can shift during the discussion. Further- more, the rationale behind this training is to increase professional confidence by introducing a variety of ways to approach discussion rather than prescribing a set way or influencing their decision-making by saying a certain facilitation style is popular or widely used.

[15]Van Bouchaute, B., Vanhove, T., Görgöz, R., Debaene, R., & Kerger, D. (2018).
[16] Council of Europe Teaching (2015), p.16

### 7. Managing the 'heat' of the discussion - tips to ensure the flow of the discussion 15'

(these tips can also be found in the Resource Pack)

Introduction by the trainer
When allowing young people the platform to discuss controversial issues there will be a different reaction from each group set. This will depend on the composition of the group, the contextual setting and institutional values at play from the setting. There will be times when the discussion needs individuals to get the discussion going alongside the need for the facilitator to when to intervene or redirect. Difficult Dialogue[17] refers to this as 'managing the heat' of the discussion. If the discussion is fueled by reactional emotional content, then the heat is likely to boil over and polarisation may occur. This exercise focuses on managing the existing heat in the group.

Group discussion - how do you manage the heat? Allow the participants to discuss the question and reflect on their own practice in terms of what they may use and what has or has not worked in the past when holding difficult conversations. Generate some feedback based on the participants' responses. Below are some further tips to help lower the heat[18].

[17] Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (sd), p.43.
[18] Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (sd), pp.39-43.

| Tip | What it looks like |
| --- | --- |
| Slow the pace down | If the discussion becomes a shouting match, where everyone is voicing their view and not listening to each other, intervention is required.<br>The facilitator needs to establish order and some system to exchange views. For a short period there could be some reflection time - 10 seconds after each comment - then someone else can make a comment that will be followed by another 10 seconds. This can continue for as long as is necessary. |
| Say what you see or hear | Pausing the discussion to remind/update the group on what has taken place. This can mean paraphrasing or quoting what people have said and can lead to reflection or consideration of these comments if required. |
| Reminder of the ground rules | Re-group the discussion by pausing and draw attention to the ground rules established at the beginning of the discussion. It can help if these are displayed and the trainer can go through them or refer to a specific rule that has lapsed in the discussion. |
| Park it | Useful if the discussion is going seriously off-track. You are acknowledging the viewpoint or opinion but outlining how it cannot be addressed within the parameters of the current discussion. Some of the 'parked' issues may well form a subsequent discussion of maybe an opportunity for 1:1 support for individual. |
| Take a break | Pausing to regroup or consider what has been said. The use of reflection time can also be used as can the ground rules. |

## 8. Phrases to deescalate redirect and reflect 15'

Introduction by the trainer
Another technique for lowering the heat and enabling the discussion to continue is to employ a question that will de-escalate, re-direct or allow the individual to reflect. Not all of the phrases you will see will work each time, again it will depend on a range of contextual factors. However, an astute remark at the right time can go a long way to realigning the discussion.

Group discussion - how do you manage the heat?
When working with young people you as will have certain techniques that you employ, for example, how you get the groups attention or how you address individuals. If you have facilitated a discussion, you may even have certain phrases that you have employed to steer or re-direct the discussion. Extreme Dialogue trainers have developed the following phrases. Look at each phrase and consider the following questions:

| | |
|---|---|
| What makes you say that? | |
| How many [group] have you met or spoken to? | |
| Do you know why people have stopped using that word? | • When you might use it? |
| That's not my experience of [group] | • What is the effect of using it?<br>• Have you used it before?<br>• Would you use it? |
| You obviously feel very strongly about this - can you tell me why? | |
| Why do you think I'm questioning what you are saying? | |
| How do you know that? | |

## 9. Seeing it from a different viewpoint - ascribed roles 20'

Introduction by the trainer
What happens when we give young people a different role to argue? What do they see? What is the impact? Another approach you can take is to give a set role to young people that they have to carry out within the discussion. This could be that someone has to argue from a viewpoint that they do not share or a position they find uncomfortable. It may require some further research and understanding of a viewpoint that they had previously dismissed.

Group discussion
With a peer, look at the controversial issue you have been given and think of the different roles you could give to the group. What viewpoints can be argued?

| Controversial Issue | Ascribed roles (groups of individuals) |
| --- | --- |
| Veganism is the only way to solve Climate Change | Pro-veganism to reduce climate change |
| | Pro-climate change (not supporting veganism) |
| | Anti-climate change |

## 10. Closing by the trainer

At the end of a training session, it is important to have a closing moment with the participants. These are some of the possible questions you can use:

• Do you feel more comfortable dealing with this issue in your practice?
• Which elements from this training were very useful for your practice?
• What questions and uncertainties are left unanswered?
• What opportunities and limitations do you see now to use this in your professional context?

At the end of the training session, as a trainer you can also refer to other training courses and to the supervision programs that are offered (see follow-up part in this training).

We can summarize this in a scheme[19]:

| | FIERCE DEBATE | POLARISATION |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Communication form | Young people express sharp opinions and challenge each other's positions | one or more young people hold a monologue, statements are made without interaction |
| Group dynamic | a heated exchange of opinions in which many young people participate and listen to each other | some pushers speak the loudest and seek followers without listening to others who become silent |
| 'Us' – 'them' relation | there is an 'us' and a 'them', but an overarching 'us' remains possible such as 'we the young', 'us local residents' | absolute separation 'us' against 'them' excluding an overarching us |

[19]Van Alstein (2018),p.77

Group discussion:

- What is an appropriate response in the case of fierce debate?
- Why is keeping the conversation going not appropriate in the case of polarisation?
- How should we response in that case?
- What are the risk of ending the conversation? And how can this be mitigated?

We organise a discussion on these questions in pairs. Afterwards the main answers are shared in the group.

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# What if polarisation dominates the group? (50-60min)

While in this training we do not want to avoid controversy and even value difficult conversations as an element of democratic citizenship, we do not want to be blind to the dangers of social polarisation. In this part of the training we look for the distinction between functional polarisation between opposing opinions, as part of a vital democracy, and destructive social polarisation. How can you assess this difference and how can you deal with it appropriately?

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**OBJECTIVES**

1. Professionals reflect on negative but also possible positive ideas on 'polarisation'.
2. Professionals can value a degree of polarisation with oppositional positions as functional and even necessary to open up debates in a vital democracy as opposed to a harmful social polarisation.
3. Professionals can recognise signals that distinguish fierce debates from negative social polarisation.
4. Professionals can choose for a different response on controversy vs. polarisation

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### 1. Introduction from the trainer: polarisation and polarisation is two 15'

Brainstorm:
- Individual: what ideas does 'polarisation' evoke in you? Give some specific examples of situations or behaviour that you define as 'polarising'…
- Share your ideas two-by-two and list 'negative' and 'positive' ideas on 'polarisation.
- We list the ideas in two columns (+ and -) on board or flipchart.

Discussion:
(Why) do we mention mostly negative things? Can 'polarisation' also have a positive meaning?

Trainer:
The concept 'polarisation' is used to describe the growing dynamics of 'Us' versus 'Them'. Both in literature and in practice we tend to consider polarisation as a negative circle, creating a negative image of 'the others'. This process can evolve to fundamentalism in a religious sense, harsh identity politics and violent extremism.

- But on the other hand, a degree of polarisation with oppositional positions is functional and even necessary to open up debates in a vital democracy. A democratic society is too divided to allow a fixed consensus on the structure of society. Moreover, an imposed consensus obscures inevitable contradiction

- Therefore? we suggest to make a difference: social polarisation between group and the hatred from 'us' versus them is the key problem, not the political polarisation between different views on issues in society, because this is normal in democratic societies.

## 2.Exercise: how do you recognise polarisation and how can you distinguish it from a fierce debate? 20'

Introduction by the trainer
This is a difficult but important issue because the pedagogical response will be different.

Conversation in pairs:

Which things would you consider as a signal of polarisation - you can think of group dynamics, language, behaviour…? – write them down.

Group discussion:

The signals are listed and discussed in comparison with research.

Van Alstein[20] distinguishes four typical signals:
- a person or group cannot be moved to an open dialogue but holds a monologue
- there is a dynamic whereby 'pushers' express their views, no longer listen to others; those who are less involved are becoming quieter.
- the other is a threat and an enemy, we of one group are placed irreconcilably on the side of the other.
- There is no longer any room in the we-side opposition for an overarching us such as: 'we citizens of this neighbourhood', or 'we pupils of this school' or 'we youngsters'.

[20]Van Alstein (2018).

During the discussion, the trainer can compare with insights from literature:

- In the event of **controversy**, it certainly makes sense to keep the conversation with the young person open. If necessary, statements will be limited, but at the same time the young person will be invited to continue the conversation. (see limiting and inviting in this training). Here it's important to point out that controversy is not to be avoided, or necessarily solved. But managed differently.

- This makes no sense in the case of **polarisation**. Asking questions only has the effect that the pusher gets more attention and drifts off further and further in its monologue. Further conversation only fuels the polarisation. In that case, it is best to end the conversation, change to another subject and/or another group member. This decision cannot be taken lightly because the conversation will be ended, and the 'pusher' may feel rejected. In a follow-up interview with two people, the counsellor can explain his or her decision afterwards in the hope of encouraging the young person to change his or her attitude after all.

## 10. Closing by the trainer

At the end of a training session, it is important to have a closing moment with the participants. These are some of the possible questions you can use:

• Do you feel more comfortable dealing with this issue in your practice?
• Which elements from this training were very useful for your practice?
• What questions and uncertainties are left unanswered?
• What opportunities and limitations do you see now to use this in your professional context?

Please consider the welfare and emotions of the participants who took part. Do you need to:
- Provide and exercise to reduce tensions or focus on something unrelated that is light-hearted?
- Provide attendees with the opportunity to speak after the session?

## Summary of training:

Having completed the training on Dealing with Controversial Issues, you will now have developed, enhanced or refreshed some key skills when working with young people. The following table provides a summary of this, but also outlines continuing factors to consider when working with young people in this area.

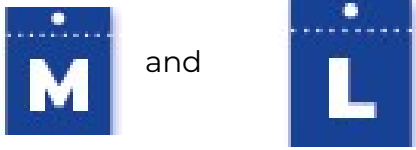| Where am I now? What can I do? | What do I still need to consider? |
|---|---|
| I am more confident in dealing withcontroversial issues. | Do I have to use a Controversial Issue whenI work with young people, or can it be any topic that generates discussion? |
| I can assess what topics are difficult and sensitive to discuss with a group of youngsters. | - Who else needs to know the topic of yournext discussion? E.g., leadership team, pa- rents<br>- Are there any individuals who may be sensitive to the next topic?<br>- How could the wider community and parents react to this discussion? |
| I am aware of the own perspective, my own approach and my own reactions in dealing with controversial issues. | What motivated you to choose this topic? |
| I can set up ground rules in a groupbefore starting discussions. | - Will these rules be the same next time?<br>- Will they be the same for another group? |
| I can use supportive discussion and questioning techniques in dealing with controversial issues. | - Will you those same techniques for thenext discussion?<br>- What techniques haven't you tried? |
| I can take the role as a facilitator of difficult discussions amongst young people. | How are you going to develop or adapt yourlevel of facilitation next time? |
| I can set up structured debates oncontroversial issues. | - What is your next debate?<br>- Why are you choosing this topic?<br>- (see questions 1-3) |
| I can deal with sudden controversy within groups of young people. | - What worked in dealing with suddencontroversy?<br>- What would you do the same/differentlynext time? |

...

# 5 Follow-up

## Small-Medium-Large

In the follow-up we want to assess the impact of the training and we want to provide a customized follow-up for participants.

Are professionals more confident to tackle controversial issues after this training? In order to receive answers, we want to repeat the same questionnaire as in the preparation phase and look for evolutions.

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**HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU NOW IN YOUR ABILITY TO....**

1. be an effective facilitator for discussions about controversial issues?
2. assess and handle appropriately the difference between heated discussion and negative polarisation?
3. set up a constructive dialogue among young people on sensitive topics?
4. develop a safe space for discussions among youngsters?
5. manage heated discussions with youngsters?
6. keep the balance between free speech and respect for each other during discussions of controversial issues?
7. set productive ground rules with youngsters for discussions about controversial issues?
8. ask the right questions in order to present issues fairly in the absence of neutral, balanced or comprehensive sources of information?
9. handle spontaneous questions and remarks of a controversial nature?
10. reflect about what you bring to the discussion (e.g. your identity, opinions and biases) and assume a facilitation style that will allow participants to engage effectively?
11. select and implement appropriately according to circumstance a range of roles in dealing with controversy e.g. 'neutral chairperson', 'balanced' approach, 'devil's advocate' and 'stated commitment'?

 and 

As a trainer you can assess the needs and possibilities for follow-up by you, your organisation or other support structures. Some options are:

- an extended training: extra meeting(s) with participants for extra or variations on the exercises in the manual
- a tailored coaching trajectory on individual needs and challenges of participants
- setting up a peer to peer support network among participants with the aim of gaining inspiring experiences by sharing experiences, coaching each other, …
- a resource pack for each participant of a training to use in train the trainers in the own organisation or other settings

# 6 More background for trainers

## What are 'controversial issues'?

The term 'controversial issue' is used in different ways in different places. 'What is controversial' changes over time and varies from place to place. Deep cleavages in society often give food to strong controversies that are accompanied by fierce emotions and contradictions. We can think of the cleavages between labour and capital or between religion and liberality. Today we see renewed tension for example on the place of the Islam religion in Western societies, or new conflicts on hot topics such as migration, gender and racism.

The Council of Europe[21] suggests a definition that has proved most useful across European countries:
"controversial issues are 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 alter- native 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 incapable of being settled simply by appeal to evidence. Controversial issues tend to arouse public suspicion, anger or concern, among young people, parents, educational institutions like school and youth work, religious and community leaders, public authorities, or even among professionals working with young people.

[21] Council of Europe (2015), p. 14-15.

## Why actively deal with controversy?

Controversies should not be avoided but should be given a well-considered place. There are three arguments to discuss controversial topics.
- It is formative for the role as citizens in pluralistic democracy.
- It sharpens critical awareness.
- It is good for their skills.

**!** In the publication Teaching Controversial Issues of the Council of Europe nine important reasons are mentioned for dealing with controversial issues[22]:

**1.** Controversial issues are by their very nature highly significant issues in the life of society - learning about these should be part of every young person's social and political education.

**2.** Debating controversial issues is part of the democratic process – it helps young people to develop some of the essential competences of democratic citizenship, such as open-mindedness, curiosity, willingness to understand the other, tolerance, and the skills of democratic debate and peaceful conflict resolution.

**3.** Young people are bombarded by information on controversial issues on a daily basis through their use of modern communication technologies, such as mobile phones, Twitter, Facebook, etc., - they need help to be able to make sense of and deal with these.

**4.** The media often present controversial issues in partial and misleading ways - in the absence of help elsewhere, it is the duty of the school to make sure young people gain a balanced understanding of issues which have the potential to make such a difference to their lives.

**5.** There are new controversies arising all the time – by learning how to deal with controversial issues now young people will be better prepared to deal with them in the future.

**6.** Investigating controversial issues demands a range of critical thinking and analytical skills – it helps young people to learn how to weigh up evidence, detect bias and make judgments on the basis of reason and evidence.

**7.** Engaging with controversial issues can make a positive contribution to young peoples' personal and emotional development – it helps them to understand their emotions and clarify their values, become better learners and more confident individuals.

**8.** Teaching about controversy issues involves real-life, up-to-date issues – they help to bring citizenship and human rights education to life.

**9.** Students very often raise controversial issues themselves regardless of the topic of the lesson – it is better for the teacher to be prepared in advance for how to deal with such events than to have to respond 'off the cuff'.

[22] Council of Europe (2015), p. 35.

No one is born a democratic citizen. Education has a big role to play. Classes become 'communities of practice, mini-democracies, where young people develop their skills'. In their work on 'the political classroom', Hess & McAvoy[23] interestingly approach fierce controversy not primarily as a risk, a danger to be contained. On the contrary, the see it as an element ofand even a driving force in citizenship education. An open climate contributes to this. This less defensive approach is in line with the pedagogical tradition of Dewey on classes and other pedagogical contexts as a hands-on lab for democracy.

In that idea of the constructive power of working with opposites in a group, we see an echo of the well-known contact theory. This theory states that under appropriate conditions interpersonal contact could be one of the most effective ways to reduce issues of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination that occur between rival groups and lead to better intergroup interactions[24].
This contact theory only works if four preconditions are met:
- There must be an equal status between the groups.
- There must be a cooperation between members of the groups.
- The members of the group share a common goal.
- The contact between the members should be supported by people with responsibilityfor those groups.
Within the 'contact theory' only positive interactions are stimulated to work against prejudices… and so, conversely, prejudices can be strongly reinforced[25].

## Why do professionals avoid controversialissues?

Professionals working with young people sometimes prefer to avoid controversial issues. The most cited motives for (non) reaction in literature, mostly on the perspectives of teachers in classes [26], are:
**Too little time**: "there are so many goals and activities and we need to make priorities". This is the classic argument. The priorities chosen are sometimes choices based on preference based on the assessment of one's own ability, rather than what is necessary to do in the group. This easy statement sometimes obscures more substantive motives for avoidance.

[23]Hess, D.E. & McAvoy, P. (2015).
[24]Pettigrew, T. F.; Tropp, L. R. (2006).
[25]Paolini, S.; Harwood, J.; Rubin, M. (2010).
[26]De Clerck, C. e.a. (2015). Philpott, S., Clabough, J., Mc Conkey, L & Turner, T.N. (2011). Hess & McAvoy (2015). Dean, B. & Joldoshalieva, R. (2007). Oulton, C, Day, V, Dillon, J & Grace, M (2004).

**Fear of loss of control**: here, the fear of the professional himself is central. Even though he or she may find the controversy important enough to deal with, the fear prevails that the intense tension would cause loss of control and the position of authority would be undermined.

**Negative effect on participants**: professionals fear that controversy would lead to conflicts between young people and break the group cohesion. Or they fear that some young people would emerge damaged from the controversy and they want to keep the climate safe for them.

**Negative reactions from the environment**: sometimes professionals are afraid of negative reactions from parents, colleagues or managers in their organisation or from the wider community in which they work.

**Lack of knowledge or experience**: professionals may feel that they have too little expertise on the content of the controversy and/or too little experience in discussing such issues with young people.

**Lack of education and training**: this is related to the previous motive. Professionals feel that they are insufficiently educated and trained to deal with controversial issues in an expert, sound manner. They feel weak and unprepared. They feel embarrassed and lack the self-confidence to deal constructively with the controversy.

These reactions in dealing with controversy can apply to teachers, youth workers or other youth supervisors: avoidance, with a number of excuses to avoid controversy, fallacy, sophistry, …

These motives are a starting point if we want to check how field workers feel (in)confident and what can be addressed in training and further intervision.

## What is the supervisor's best attitude?

Teachers, youth workers and other professionals who supervise young people have a central role in how controversy is dealt with in a group. What position can they take? Van Alstein[27] bases himself on the models of Kelly[28] and Hess[29] to distinguish four possible positions:

1. **Avoiding controversy**: the subject is ignored and excluded from discussion in the group. We discussed earlier the different motives why professionals do this.

2. **Deny** that the issue is controversial, because the professionals believe that there is a correct answer e.g. on the theory of evolution.

3. **Directive teaching** while the pupils explore the different perspectives. The supervisor acknowledges that there are different opinions but gives direction to the discussion. He himself puts forward an answer as correct, while other perspectives also receive an honest but critical discussion.

4. **Neutral impartiality**: the issue is presented openly, there are different legitimate points of view. The professional assumes the role of an impartial facilitator and must, above all, ensure that different points of view are given a fair chance to be heard.


Most authors agree that systematically avoiding controversy is not the best position. There is less unanimity as to what the appropriate role should be.

Kelly[30] prefers the third position. According to him, it has great pedagogical value that youth supervisors give their own views and at the same time leave room for other views, so that young people can critically review those views. According to him, this openness is preferable to a cramped neutrality. Other points of view must be given a fair chance and young people must be encouraged to take a critical approach to the point of view of the youth worker or the teacher himself.

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[27] Van Alstein, M. (2018), p. 83-84.

[28] Kelly, T. (1986), p 113-118.

[29] Hess, D.E. (2004), p. 259-260.

[30] Kelly, T. (1986), p 113-118

But others are reluctant to put forward one position as the best. According to them, it is impossible, and indeed undesirable, to establish a single line of conduct about how professionals react best in all situations. This will depend on the assessment that professionals make of their group, the individual participants, the context, … And that brings us to a next challenge: how can you properly assess this situation? Ultimately, this remains a matter of the experience and craftsmanship of professionals. Nevertheless, Van Alstein gives two suggestions to support professionals in their assessment:

1. **Is this an open question or an issue with a more established answer?** Issues on which there is a broad scientific consensus like climate change require a different approach than issues on which there is much contradiction and doubt.
2. **Does the context allow space for controversy?** The discussion of the theory of evolution will be different in the biology lesson than during an open conversation on religion in the youth club.

A recurring tension in taking up a position is that between 'being neutral' and 'giving one's own opinion'[31]. For many professionals, after all, neutrality seems to be the best option, not to provoke negative reactions and not to hinder young people from expressing their opinions. But in practice, this is a difficult position: often you can express your own opinion subconsciously, and young people do not get the chance to critically approach the vision of their supervisor. Van Alstein[32] makes two important remarks in this regard:

- In any case, the choice for a neutral position remains dependent on the concrete situation, sometimes a more steering position is needed.
- A more nuanced view of neutrality means that the professional does not express an opinion on the issue itself, but rather guards the overarching values of freedom and equality in a democratic society.

There is a double concern about giving one's own opinion:
  • Ideological influence: young people take up the opinion outright.
  • Pedagogical influence: an open discussion is hampered.

In a large-scale study, Hess[33] found little evidence of this ideological influence: young people do not have a blind opinion, but they do have an interest in what their supervisors think, as long as those supervisors also approach their ideas with respect. Therefore, it is important how they do this, because supervisors do have a great pedagogical influence on the safe climate for discussion in the group. It is not a matter of whether, but mainly how you give your own opinion: well-founded, inviting criticism and contradiction, challenging young people to continue giving their own opinion. This can contribute to the safe climate that is the basis for dealing positively with controversies in the group

[31] Based on Van Alstein, M. (2018), p. 86-88.
[32] Van Alstein, M. (2018), p. 87.
[33] Hess, D.E. (2009), p. 98-110.

# What are 'border zones' in dealing with controversies?

If you want to make room for - even fierce - discussion and promote dealing with opposing opinions – often comes with strong feelings - in an open climate, then you also wonder where the boundaries are. In a pedagogical context that question is not always easy to answer. After all, these boundaries can vary:

- **According to the pedagogical context**: is it a familiar one-to-one situation or a large group meeting, how strict or broad are the limits set by the organisation?
- **According to the target group**: how is the group composed, how well do you know the members and their sensitivities, how safe is the climate in the group for fierce debate?
- **According to the subject**: for some issues there will be more room for controversial statements, for others it will be less so.
- **According to the facilitator's person**: the facilitator's convictions and confidence in his or her own ability to manage heated discussions also affect the scope for controversial statements.

**!** That is why we prefer to talk about **pedagogical border areas rather than borders**[34]. We can distinguish three possible border areas:

## 1-SOCIAL

This border area is defined by the basis of our democracy: freedom and equality. Statements that expressly contest or deny the basic freedom and equal rights of others are to be found in a border area. Racist or homophobic statements are clear examples.

## 2-SCIENTIFIC

This border area is defined by scientific knowledge on which there is consensus. There is less room for questioning well-founded scientific knowledge than for all kinds of issues on which there is more scientific doubt. This is a border area that we often enter in an educational situation, where actual scientific knowledge needs to be taught, with less room for controversy. Clear examples are global warming or the theory of evolution.

## 3-PEDAGOGICAL

This border area is linked to security in the group climate. There are two poles to this security: security to be able to express oneself freely without fear of negative consequences, and security not to be hurt or humiliated. A typical example is the free expression of statements about groups that are very offensive to young people belonging to that group.

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[34] Van Alstein, M. (2018), p. 78 introduces the concept of pedagogical border areas rather than strict borders. Our distinction between three sorts of border areas is based on this concept.

In these three border areas, a neutral attitude on the part of the supervisor is not possible. In this training course, we will go deeper into the possibilities of dealing with this in a responsible manner.

If we look at these border areas, we can think about the content and about the process. When we zoom in on the content, we ask ourselves which topics we are or are not open to dialogue on. If we look at the process, we wonder how strong the dynamics of opposition can lead us. We will deal with this in the following two paragraphs.

## Are all issues equally open to dialogue?

We cannot just consider all subjects as 'open to dialogue' and content ourselves with a role as neutral discussion leader. Hatred-mongering statements or denial of the Holocaust are not 'open topics' but require a position from the facilitator. The area of non-negotiables is tricky, as they can invite from facilitators and systems the sort of repressive positioning we want to discourage. The dialogue process and tone is applicable when challenging.

In addition, Hess & McAvoy[35] point to the distinction between empirical and political issues:

- In the case of **empirical issues**, well-founded statements are possible on the basis of solid scientific evidence. For these subjects, there is little room for fully open debate. Examples are: is the radiation from mobile phones harmful to health? Is a mouth mask useful in combating a contagious virus? These issues are not settled by open debate but by empirical research.

- **Political issues** are about what society should look like. There are always different, contradictory but valuable arguments possible for these issues. Should we allow euthanasia, and in what situations? What requirements can a society impose on newcomers? Can marriage be opened up to same-sex couples? Such issues always have a normative dimension. For such issues, debate is not only useful, but also very necessary for the vitality of democracy.

## Above all, should we avoid polarisation?

The concept of 'polarisation' is used to describe the growing dynamics of 'Us' versus 'Them', 'in- & outgroups' and the continuing growing social distance and alienation. The mainstream literature on polarisation focusses on the negative circle creating an essentialist image of 'the others. This process can evolve to fundamentalism in a religious sense, harsh identity politics and violent extremism. The solution often proposed by mainstream literature is to depoliticise the situation and strengthen the middle ground[36].

[35]Hess, D.B. & McAvoy, P. (2015), p. 159 ff.
[36]Brandsma, B. (2017).

But on the other hand, other literature stresses that a degree of polarisation with oppositional positions is functional and even necessary to open up debates in a vital democracy[37]. Social polarisation and hatred from 'us' versus 'them' is the key problem, not the political polarisation between different views on issues in society, because this is normal in democratic societies.

This training is based on an **'agonistic' view on citizenship** (education). This view re-evaluates conflicts as a source of a vital democracy[38]. A democratic society is too divided to allow a fixed consensus on how we shape our society. There are always different visions, different interests, there are people and groups with a lot of power, there are people and groups who want more influence…. A democracy is always developing, is never finished and, like any society, it inevitably creates deficits, forms of inequality and exclusion. Questioning and trying to change that society, debating what is desirable, what is harmful, what we should and should not do in the future, … All of this is at the heart of a vital democracy. A democracy based on an imposed consensus is no longer a democracy.

However, in a vital democracy, we are faced with one very important challenge. We must ensure that all these contradictions and struggles do not lead to forms of enmity between 'us' and 'them'. If we have opposing visions and interests, it does not mean that 'the others' are enemies who must be oppressed, humiliated and eliminated. No, in a democracy we regard each other as legitimate opponents. This means that we are all free and equal citizens, including those with whom we absolutely disagree. Therefore, the only limit that we can draw sharply from the debate is precisely this limit of freedom and equality: if we no longer want to approach each other as free and equal citizens, we are entering a dangerous path of enmity. This is what we call **'agonistic' citizenship**, in which we succeed in transforming conflict not into enmity but into conflict between people and groups that recognise each other as legitimate opponents.

**!** Thus, opinions and viewpoints are welcomed, but hate, victimisation and dehumanisation are not welcomed. **We have to work on a shared safe democratic space where we can challenge and 'fight' each other as opponents in a non-violent way**. If not, contradictions might become absolute and the 'enemy' is created, hated, attacked, expelled or destroyed.

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[37] Chantal Mouffe considers opposites not only inevitable but also fruitful for a democracy. Based on her insights, Stijn Sieckelinck (2017) argues in favour of 're-radicalisation'.

[38] Mouffe, C. (2005).

In our training, 'managing' polarisation is an essential aspect. In many prevention practices, managing polarisation is focusing on seeking the middle ground based on a view of society as a coherent whole in which there is a consensus on the prevailing value and norms[39]. In the proposed model and training we try to cope with two possible problems with that mainstream approach of 'de-polarisation'[40]:

- Dissensus and conflict are normal phenomena in a society. In this way polarisation can be very productive, because it encourages contradictions and exploration on certain issues that make it possible to process social changes.

- The mainstream 'polarisation model' tends to ignore power relations between the two poles of the opposition. In this way, the responsibility for social problems threatens to be attributed to those who are excluded and for whom the repercussions of the problem are severe.

In this training we have been trying to move away from discussion as a winner/loser format. Trying to frame it differently so that it is not a character attack rather the airing of views. This may allow the two possible outcomes to flourish? We promote the diversity of opinions, diversity is not necessarily a problem, harmony is not important (we don't have to agree with the group). We don't think in terms of winners/losers or we/us. We need to be careful with polarisation, but power relations are important to take with us in the discussion.

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[39] See e.g. the influential depolarization model of Bart Brandsma in: Brandsma, B. (2017).
[40] Menarg (2019).

# 7  This training in the ORPHEUS project

**ORPHEUS - Offline and online Radicalisation Prevention Holding back Extremism and Upholding Security**

In European cities the threat of violent extremism of all types, such as jihadi, extreme right and hate crimes, is a significant and rising social concern. The Interreg ORPHEUS project will develop alternatives to offline and online prevention of violent extremism. We propose an approach that is not problem oriented but wellbeing oriented. ORPHEUS will develop new integrated and aligned services by extending the prevention service together with private and social institutions, and with young people and their educators as central actors.

1. **We enhance the integral prevention model to address violent extremism.**
We create a new prevention framework: the ORPHEUS Prevention Pyramid. We combine efforts from general prevention to direct intervention. We target the interplay of different risk and protective factors.

2. **We develop safe spaces for and with young people.**
In our safe spaces approach, we stimulate and organise open dialogue, connect young people in balanced bonding with family, friends and institutions and support the public expression of their grievances.

3. **We build resilience, critical thinking skills and increase confidence of educators.**
We enhance key analytical skills within young people. We involve young people and educators as part of the solution. We empower educators to facilitate difficult conversationson sensitive topics.

4. **We integrate online work on different levels of prevention.**
We develop online alter-narratives to raise critical awareness. We also develop broader internet safety techniques to keep young people safe online.

5. **We provide guidance and policy recommendations for adoption of an integratedprevention method in the 2Seas area.**

Eight European partners, consisting of professionals, researchers and policy makers, participate: Stad Mechelen (BE) - Greta Grand Littoral (FR) - Portsmouth City Council (UK) - Ceapire (BE) - University of Portsmouth (UK) - University College Roosevelt (NL) - Arteveldehogeschool Gent (BE) - Contourdetwern (NL).
This training is part of the Orpheus project and relates to the key concepts and models in this project.

## Safe spaces

In the Orpheus' framework paper, the concept of 'safe spaces' is explained as a pedagogical approach:

> The concept of safe space is not so much characterised by a location, institution, organisation… but by the pedagogy and philosophy behind it. The pedagogical view should be aimed at rebalancing protection and emancipation, and (re)install 'safe spaces as laboratories' where young people are in charge, working together in empowering ways and participate in the whole society.

One of the main goals of the safe spaces approach is that delicate topics can be addressed comfortably with a positive pedagogical support as opposed to a disproportional repressive reaction, censorship or exclusion. This training helps key players (such as social and youth workers, educators, voluntary key players and peers) to engage in and facilitate implementation of safe space solutions for young people who are in at risk of engaging in a process of social alienation. For the specific topic of controversial issues, various studies[41] have indicated that youth workers need support in at least on three key elements:

- maintaining a relation of trust and confidentiality with the young people,
- coping with their own action embarrassment
- dealing with the question 'what is negotiable and what isn't?' in discussing controversial issues with young people.

Thomas et al[42] concluded that there was a distribution of confidence in staff that teach subjects that cover 'difficult conversations' as part of their curriculum

Dealing soundly with controversy starts with an understanding of what a safe space can mean for young people. A safe space can be described as, on the one hand, a confined space where a lab is set up for learning experiences with a freedom of expression that is not always possible in the outside world.

This may evolve into what Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy[43] call a 'political class', a space where discussions about politics and society are given a central place. In addition to being a 'closed' space, the safe space is also a 'public space' connected to the outside world, and in that sense the lab is never completely closed. All conflicts in society can just pop up in the safe space. It is a small step from that interpretation of safe space as a lab for the public debate to the idea of 'making the debate public' in practices of politicization with and by young people.

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[41] See for instance Van Alstein (2019) and Menarg (2018).

[42] Busher, J., Choudhury, T., Thomas, P., Harris, G. (2017).

[43] Hess, D.E. & McAvoy, P. (2015).

# Prevention pyramid
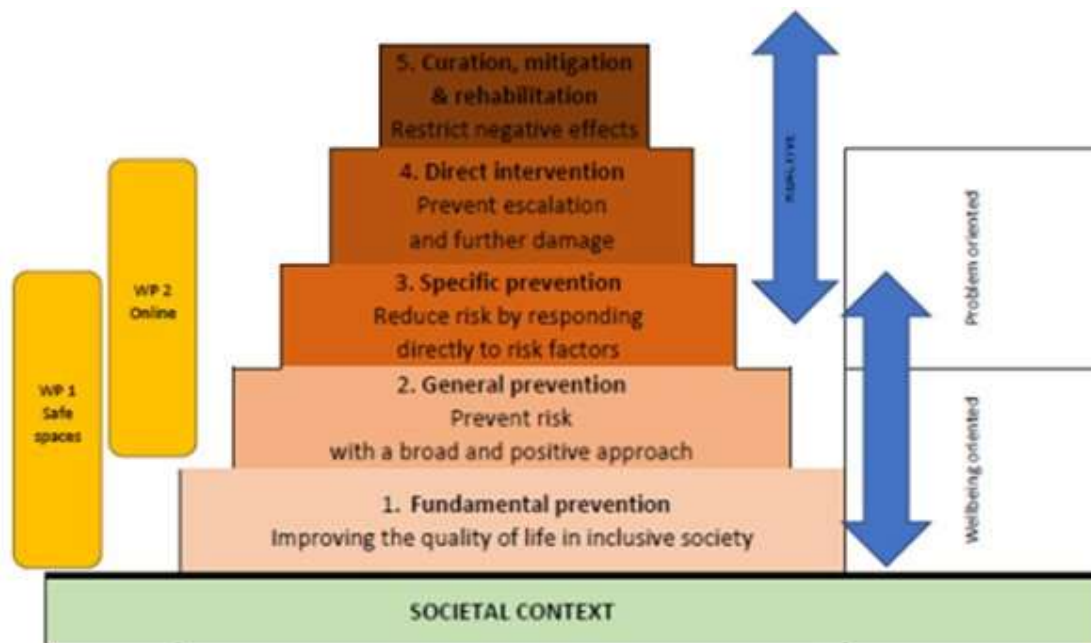


Framework for the integral prevention of radicalisation towards political violence - Görgöz, Vanhove & Van Bouchaute, elaborated on the model of Deklerck, J. (2006)

This training focuses on:

**General prevention = wellbeing oriented**
Upskilling educators and youth workers in managing controversial issues with young people is a contribution to citizenship education. In our approach of citizenship, we embrace the significance of disagreement and conflict in a shared democratic space. The key issue is that citizens can approach each other as opponents in a discussion and not as enemies. Our starting point is that young people are entitled to have a voice in the public debate about society as equals. This doesn't mean that they don't need pedagogical support, but it stresses their actorship (see citizenship and politicization).

**Specific prevention = problem oriented:**
This training supports educators in addressing risk factors (see puzzle model).

In this training the emphasis refers more to strengthening the general proactive and inclusive preventive goals in pedagogical environments (the lower layers of the pyramid) than to the more problem-oriented and curative expectations in the fight against violent extremism (the higher layers of the pyramid).

# Puzzle model on the risk factors for violent extremism

Orpheus uses a puzzle model – instead of the mainstream linear models – to tackle four main risk factors for violent extremism[44].
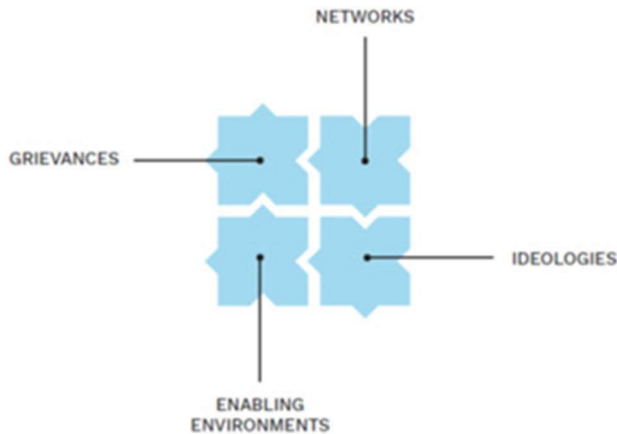


This training focuses on three of these factors:

1. This training focuses on 'offering legitimate and effective channels for the expression of **grievances**. Grievances concerning both objective and subjective injustice, inequality, discrimination, … can become important drivers towards violent extremism. Within safe spaces young people have the opportunity to express their grievances in an interactive, constructive and informal environment (internal dimension of safe spaces) and work on solutions.

2. Attention for a safe and respectful climate during intense discussions and for recognising opposites without lapsing into enmity contributes to **'positive networks'.**

3. For the puzzle element of '**ideologies**': this training helps key persons to support young people in critical thinking on ideas, narratives, … This scheme clarifies what we want to achieve here:

| Key skill | What it means | What it looks like | What it does |
|---|---|---|---|
| Critical thinking. | Ability to question information and views. | Asking why has this been produced and for what reason? Who produced this and why? Why has it been shared with you? | Allows you to separate the authentic from the made-up. Gives you a broader perspective on views and information. Allows you to spot harmful narratives |

Webster, J. (2020). Critical thinking

[44] The puzzle model was developed by Hafez, M., & Mullins, C. (2015).

## Politicisation

The Orpheus project accepts the **need of public expression of grievances** in tackling the causes of violent extremism. We will develop methods to support young people to express and address their grievances in the public sphere.

Within safe spaces delicate topics can be addressed comfortably, young people are stimulated to engage in social institutions, and are supported to express and address their grievances in the public sphere. **Learning to debate controversial issues** in a constructive way is a necessary step in the safe spaces approach in order to upskill you people in expressing and addressing grievances. It is the public character of expressing grievances that refers to the concept of **politicisation**. Politicisation is concerned with practices that contribute to the organisation of the **public debate** and disagreement about how to organise society together in a democratic way. That public disagreement is intimately linked to a vital democracy.

This training indirectly supports the politicisation idea in the Orpheus project and will be combined with a specific training module on politicisation.

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## Social innovation