

# DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES



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# Table of contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
How to use this Resource Pack? .....	4
<b>Reflecting on controversial issues .....</b>	<b>5</b>
What are controversial issues?.....	5
Safe space: a necessity for addressing controversial issues .....	5
Why actively deal with controversy with young people?.....	6
Why do professionals avoid controversial issues? .....	6
Why discuss controversial issues with young people?.....	6
<b>Dealing with sudden controversy .....</b>	<b>8</b>
How can I slow down? .....	8
How can I assess if statements are (un)acceptable?.....	8
How can I limit unacceptable statements?.....	9
How can I respond to 'pop-up' comments? .....	9
Which discussion and questioning techniques can be supportive?.....	10
<b>Organising a structured debate.....</b>	<b>11</b>
Preparation for discussion.....	11
The process of the discussion .....	12
Structured debate example - Global Warming .....	14
Examples of debate formats.....	15
Closing a session with young people on controversial issues.....	18
<b>What if polarisation dominates the group? .....</b>	<b>19</b>
Is polarisation always a bad thing? .....	19
How do you recognise social polarisation and how can you distinguish it from a fierce debate? .....	19
How to respond? .....	20
<b>Acknowledgments and further reading.....</b>	<b>21</b>

# Introduction

## How to use this Resource Pack?

- This pack is designed to support professionals in dealing with controversial issues.
- It is a supplement to the Orpheus Dealing with Controversial Issues Manual for Trainers.
- It offers practical tips and advice that will raise the confidence of **professionals** (key Orpheus objective)
- This tool offers support
  - for your own reflection on dealing with controversial issues.
  - for dealing with sudden controversies that 'pop-up' in a group of youngsters.
  - for organising a structured debate with young people on controversial issues.
  - for assessing the difference between heated debate and polarisation
- Additional hyperlinks in the guidance will take to further resources to assist in delivery.



Remarkable: as part of the Orpheus Project, college students of Portsmouth were asked the following question: how often do you talk about sensitive issues?

Every week	21%
Every month	14%
Only when there is a big news event	39%
Hardly ever	25%

### SAFEGUARDING INDIVIDUALS


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 post discussion, it may be necessary to offer one-to-one support or discuss further outside of the group setting, especially if concerns are raised. Professionals 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.

It is important to link the information in this resource pack to appropriate national or regional legislation and education standards. For example in the UK, Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) is a school curriculum subject in England which focuses on developing knowledge, skills and attributes to keep young people healthy and safe and to prepare them for life and work. In addition to this, from September 2020 Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) will become compulsory in schools in England. This will not only focus on relationships and sex education but also on physical and mental health.

# Reflecting on controversial issues

## What are controversial issues?

- What are controversial issues?
- What do young people think are controversial issues?
- What experience have you (or staff team or organisation) have in dealing with controversial issues?
- Are discussions on controversial issues a planned event?
- Are discussions on controversial issues a response to young people's comments?

 The Council of Europe publication Teaching Controversial Issues defines controversial issues as “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society”.

## Safe space: a necessity for addressing controversial issues

Dealing with controversial issues in a group or organisation is not an isolated issue: what are the conditions for a safe climate for professionals themselves, and for the young people

### How can I assess 'safe space' for me as a professional?


- How important is a safe climate for yourself as a professional? What makes the climate unsafe 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?

### How can I assess 'safe space' for the young people I work with?

- What makes the climate unsafe for young people?
- 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?

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 time to diffuse a heated discussion (parking it).

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.

 The idea of a safe space holds a double meaning and an 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.

## Why actively deal with controversy with young people?

What options professionals have in dealing with controversial issues?

- **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. You also can signpost to the alter narratives training.



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

## Why do professionals avoid controversial issues?

Professionals sometimes prefer to avoid controversial issues

- Too little time
- Fear of loss of control,
- Negative effect on participants
- Negative reactions from the environment (parents, school, organisation)
- Lack of knowledge or experience
- Lack of education and training

→ Do you recognize some of these motives? How can you address them?

Where can you get support? Orpheus offers training and further supervision groups.

## Why discuss controversial issues with young people?

There are three main arguments to discuss controversial topics.

- It is formative for the role as citizens in pluralistic democracy,
- it sharpens critical awareness and
- it is 'good for their skills'.

The Council of Europe publication Teaching Controversial Issues outlines **nine reasons** for teaching controversial issues:

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'.

→ Which argument(s) is/are important for you in your context?

# Dealing with sudden controversy

## How can I slow down?

Some stockphrases can help to 'slow down' so that you gain time to look for adequate responses instead of simply avoiding the situation:

- What makes you say that?
- Do you know where that word comes from?
- That's not my experience of your group.
- What's your intention here?

## How can I assess if statements are (un)acceptable?

This issue remains ultimately a choice you and your organisation must make in specific situations. Therefore, no strict boundaries can be drawn, rather we can point to **pedagogical 'border areas'**.

- Sometimes you will find a statement absolutely unacceptable.
- In other cases, you 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 navigate well in these border areas, you must know to a certain degree your group and the needs of the individuals. We can distinguish three possible border areas:

### 1. SOCIAL

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

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 a school situation. 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.

In these border areas, a neutral attitude on your part of the supervisor is not possible. We go deeper into the possibilities of dealing with this in a responsible manner.



## How can I limit unacceptable statements?

When we limit young people, we 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... This is where the real stakes lie in limiting statements: do we contribute to an open and safe pedagogical climate?



How can a supervisor limit unacceptable statements and yet continue to invite for conversation? Some sentences that you can use in ‘limiting and inviting’:

“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 term is not considered acceptable anymore?”

“I would like to listen to you, but you won't be able to 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.”

## How can I respond to 'pop-up' comments?

- Listen carefully and react calmly.
- Discern motivation and identify implications.
- If required challenge the view not the person.
- Disclosures of a personal nature should be discouraged in a public setting, encourage young people to speak to a trusted adult.
- Pinpoint misunderstanding if required and clarify or "park" issue to deescalate.
- Resist temptation to simply counter.
- Acknowledge view and arrange follow up session to allow adequate time to discuss.

## Which discussion and questioning techniques can be supportive?

Some ideas:

- Show respect by listening carefully and sincerely, show this verbally and in your body language.
- 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 and complexity rather than seeking simplistic or black and white answers, ask who thinks differently and 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. (Democratic dialogue)

# Organising a structured debate

## Preparation for discussion

- Each conversation will be different and will require different levels of preparation depending on experience and topics to be covered.
- Consider building on experiences of individuals, using other subjects or texts that will provide a less contrived link to discussion.
- There is a structure to the conversation that focuses activities before the discussion, during the discussion and after the discussion.
- A 3-step strategy is proposed to navigate through a particular topic area.

During a focus group with students from a local college, they said the following:

- “Where discussion works best is when professionals see the young people as equal and a source of new ideas.”
- “The culture of the institution will also play a huge part in how the discussion is conducted.”

### Reflection

- The following structures are a guide to holding discussions and the Orpheus rationale is to allow for end users to adapt and change to suit their setting, delivery style and the young people they work with.
- The key point is to begin having conversations and discussions and to view it as a process of development for you as the professional and for the young people.
- Key skills such as discussing, facilitating discussions, becoming a critical thinker and working collaboratively must be viewed as a process overtime.
- A key objective of Orpheus is to empower both professionals and young people and this can only be achieved through experimentation of and adaptation with these resources.

## The process of the discussion

- Decide on the outcome(s) for the discussion (e.g. a planned activity on a topic as part of a curricula; a response to topic raised by a young person; a response to a media story)
- Assess the capabilities of the group (complete the pre-evaluation sheet)
- Go through the 'before the discussion' techniques to establish ground rules/conduct and topic
- Generate a quick warm-up activity designed to get people involved and engaged (optional)
- Prepare a 3-part strategy to shape the discussion
- Hold the conversation adhering to the ground rules, conduct and values of the setting
- Close the session by reflecting and responding to issues and complete the post evaluation

### Before the discussion

Ground rules	Warming up	Making decisions
<p>Respect of views and be tolerant of views.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen and respond to the comment, not the person.</li> <li>• Use the correct vocabulary - seek clarification if needed.</li> <li>• Choose language that will include all participants.</li> <li>• Avoid making it about a person in the room.</li> <li>• Keep the conversation within the room.</li> </ul> <p>Everyone has the right to be heard or to refrain from speaking.</p>	<p>Use a stimulus such as a:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photo</li> <li>• Video clip</li> <li>• Headline from the news</li> <li>• A quotation</li> </ul> <p>This will help get the group talking.</p> <p><i>N.B A bank of resources may be possible but will need the input of all partners.</i></p>	<p>Decide what will be the focus for the discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator led</li> <li>• Youngster led</li> </ul> <p>Voting on topics that are current either locally, nationally or globally</p> <p>Consider using interaction voting like Mentimeter:  <a href="https://www.mentimeter.com/login">https://www.mentimeter.com/login</a></p>

### During the discussion

Conduct - how do discuss?	How to facilitate?	Activities/resources
<p>What does respect and tolerance look like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we disagree without offending?(Creating some scripts...).</li> <li>• How to respond and not react or judge.</li> <li>• Moving beyond winners and losers.</li> <li>• Be prepared to empathise</li> <li>• Have an open mind. Don't mischaracterise arguments.</li> </ul>	<p>Clarifying responses/reactions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dealing with comments</li> <li>• Framing questions</li> <li>• Managing equity and flow of discussion</li> <li>• Responding to the temperature</li> </ul> <p>See Extreme Dialogue response techniques:  <a href="https://extremedialogue.org/educational-resources">https://extremedialogue.org/educational-resources</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Handouts</li> <li>• Games</li> <li>• Assigned roles</li> <li>• Use of photos/videos</li> </ul>

### After the discussion

Personal reflection	Group evaluation
<p>Was I respectful?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did I listen?</li> <li>• Did I use appropriate language?</li> <li>• Did I respond to the discussion?</li> </ul> <p>What I can take from this?</p>	<p>How was the overall conduct?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was the facilitation?</li> <li>• What part of the session worked well?</li> <li>• How could the session be different?</li> </ul>

## Structured debate example - Global Warming

### Ground Rules

Prior to debate, ask the participants how they can make the debate safe, what ground rules are appropriate and how to respect other people's view?

### Three step strategy

#### → 1 Mindmap - What is the issue about?

What do they know about global warming? Why is it a contested term, where is the controversy?

The key questions may be:

- Is global warming real?
- If global warming is real, is it caused mainly by human activity?
- If global warming is real, how harmful is it likely to be?
- Are claims by either side exaggerated? why would this be?
- If global warming is real, caused mainly by human activity, and likely to be very harmful, what can we do about it?

For example: two opposing recent headlines could stimulate debate.

- "30,000 scientists have signed a petition arguing that there is no convincing scientific evidence for anthropogenic climate change."
- "Climate change now irreversible due to warming oceans, UN body warns."

#### → 2 What are the arguments or positions?

Use news articles to support. Is it a judgement to a degree? How are views influenced? According to [www.bestschools.org](http://www.bestschools.org):

Environmental groups argue that global warming is very real, that it has been caused by human activity, and that we have already begun to see the consequences through higher sea levels, severe weather events, and growing food scarcity. This group argues that we have a moral obligation to adapt regulations, consumer practices, and lifestyle decisions to reverse these trends. These groups also argue that our current path could lead to yet more catastrophic weather events, ecological disasters, and resource shortages, all of which would negatively impact the prospects for human survival on earth.

Sceptics argue that these dangers have been exaggerated and are not supported by scientific data. There are others in this demographic that take the position that while global warming may be occurring, there is no evidence to suggest these patterns are connected to human activity. This position also rejects a credible environmental need for regulatory limits on human activity — commercial, industrial, recreational, or otherwise.

### → 3 How can we determine the strength or weight of the argument/evidence?

Consider:

- Where does the evidence come from?
- Is it supported and independently fact checked? Or scientifically peer reviewed?
- Can we identify any bias in the arguments? What is the purpose of the information presented? Does it seek to influence?
- Where are the gaps? Do we need more information?

### **Other controversial issues that could be discussed**

Immigration

Terrorism/Radicalisation

Gun Control

Animal Rights

Cannabis Legalisation

Capital Punishment

Is violence justified when protesting?

Conspiracy theories

### **Examples of debate formats**

#### **1. Role-play debate**

Participants are randomly assigned teams to represent sides of the argument and within each team roles are assigned, teacher, scientist, parent, young person etc. This allows for participants to assume roles and viewpoints that may be unfamiliar to them and will support a more holistic understanding of the arguments. They are asked to discuss or research the topic and present the key arguments. Depending on timeframe, the participants can use the internet, including fact checking websites or other materials for research. Alternatively, participants are provided with the key information by the facilitator to analyse. During the debate, each side and role presents their point of view in turn.

In the end, the participants debate which side presented the strong arguments, identified gaps in knowledge or demonstrated the greatest critical thinking skills. The intention is that one side does not "win" the debate, but that both sides present clear and well-reasoned viewpoints. It's important that each viewpoint is understood, whilst appreciating agreement is not always possible in debate.

## **2. Online expert led debate**

The rise of fake news & conspiracy theory narratives surrounding COVID19 in March and April 2020 was very alarming. A question - dialogue - expert format was used to manage a debate on this topic. The facilitator used online survey technology to ask questions and gather opinions (anonymously). An open dialogue occurred between participants mediated by the facilitator. Subsequently, an expert in this topic addressed the questions raised by young people and provided an opportunity to discuss the issue more broadly. The young people were once again asked to express their views via the online survey technology to establish whether their opinions had changed. In summary, the role of the facilitator was to mediate conversation, to structure the Q&A-sessions and ensure all views were heard. The facilitator also indulged in the questioning of the experts at time, to make sure that the young people would not feel as if the facilitator was biased in their approach.

## **3. The rotating table**

This exercise consists of making the participants think about the themes, problems or concepts through posters. The trainer or the group selects the different themes evoked and formulates questions. The themes are written on posters and the group is divided into sub-groups with each group provided with a marker pen. Participants are given a few minutes to contribute their ideas to the theme. When the production time is over, one group's sheets are shifted, and the process is repeated on the new theme. Posters go through some or all of the groups. The last group creates a synthesis of the reflexion to present to the large group. Once the activity is over, carry out a pooling: a debriefing or a synthesis on the ideas proposed so that the participants can appropriate them. This moment will also make it possible to refine the solutions, to sort and group them.



## 4. The shifting debate

This exercise is a facilitation technique that encourages the expression of participants' thoughts through argumentation. The facilitator places the statements related to the topic to be discussed on the walls of the room. The participants discover the proposals, identifying one that "speaks to them" / "challenges them" and position themselves below it. Once everyone has chosen their statement, the facilitator asks one participant to explain their position. Then it is the turn of another person to make an argument that relates to what has been said previously. At the end of each intervention, if the proposed argument leads another participant to change his or her point of view, he or she can change places and position himself or herself under the same poster. The debate continues until everyone has had a chance to express themselves and that everyone feels in tune with the statement they are defending.

This activity must be followed by a debriefing / a moment of re-appropriation or individual/collective construction so that each participant can build his or her own conceptions and translate them into concrete actions.

### Tips to consider

#### Integration

- Use topics that have a connection to an event that caused interest with young people
- Start small, with less controversial and more manageable issues
- Break down issues into parts and ensure the vocabulary is understood
- Reinforce links to skills such as critical thinking and evaluation of evidence.

#### Management

- Consider how comfortable young people will be to share views and the group dynamic - establish ground rules
- "Keep conversation in the room", facilitator won't repeat unless they are concerned of a safeguarding risk.
- Respecting young people's right to not participate or putting anyone on the "spot".
- Have a system of taking a break if the debate becomes too heated
- Create "a no easy answers board" to record points that are heavily contested or not able to find a solution.
- Avoid binary understandings.
- Provide follow up information or reference to fact checking websites.

## Closing a session with young people on controversial issues

- It is vital that sessions are closed suitably. The facilitator can close a session by checking understanding, highlighting the key points and addressing any unanswered questions.
- It is important to relate the activity back to key principles or "real world" skills such as debating or making an argument effectively. These key skills can then be replicated in new situations and aid personal development.
- The process of closing a session or "cooling" down should be planned and co-created with the young people alongside the other phases of the session. Follow up support or the offer to discuss one to one should be made if possible.
- If the session has included small groups work, young people can feed back into the main group to summarise the discussion.
- It is also important that feedback or questions can be received anonymously, so young people can hand in questions or feedback if they feel more comfortable doing this.
- The facilitator should also endeavour to stand back at the end of the session while the young people leave in case someone wants to ask questions or arrange a follow up
- In order to cool down the session, an activity can be arranged such as a quiz or more relaxing exercises such as mindfulness.

# What if polarisation dominates the group?

## Is polarisation always a bad thing?

We tend to consider polarisation as a negative circle, creating a negative image of 'the other'. 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.

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 society.

## How do you recognise social polarisation and how can you distinguish it from a fierce debate?

	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.

## How to respond?

- 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 resource pack). The controversy is not to be avoided, or necessarily solved. Just 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, you can explain your decision afterwards in the hope of encouraging the young person to change his or her attitude after all.

# Acknowledgments and further reading

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Democratische dialoog for their Democratic Dialogue Resource  
<http://democratischedialoog.be/>

Johnathan Ball & Tim Parry Peace Foundation for their Extreme Dialogue resource. <https://www.peace-foundation.org.uk/our-work/extreme-dialogue/>  
<https://extremediadialogue.org/>

Tony Blair Institute for Global Change for their Difficult Dialogue resource  
<https://institute.global/advisory/dealing-difficult-dialogue>

Council of Europe for their Teaching Controversial Issues resource  
<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/teaching-controversial-issues-developing-effective-training-for-teachers-and-school-leaders>



Social  
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