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# Learning to Disagree: Needs Assessment

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## **Learning to Disagree**

### **Needs Assessment**

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## Table of contents

1.	Introduction	2
2.	Methodology	2
3.	Results and implications for the project	4
	3.1 Controversial issues	4
	3.2 The role of discussions in history teaching	6
	3.3 Assessment practices	8
	3.4 Constraints	10
	3.5 Teaching approaches: setting limits	12
	3.6 Teaching approaches: encouraging critical thinking, battling stereotypes and creating empathy	16
4.	Conclusion	24
5.	References	26

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## 1. Introduction

The project ‘Learning to Disagree’ aims at strengthening students’ social and civic competences through discussion, debate and dialogue in history and civic education. Against the backdrop of students’ exposure to extremist ideologies, populism and ‘alternative’ facts on the internet it focuses on improving teachers’ capacity to conduct discussions about controversial and sensitive issues in their classrooms. This needs assessment is designed to identify what educators need today in order to help their students acquire social and civic competences through dialogue, debate and discussion on contested issues. To translate this general idea into more concrete aims, we wanted to find out

- what teachers perceive to be sensitive and controversial issues,
- how often, and with reference to which kinds of formats, they practice dialogue, discussion and debate,
- how they assess their students in this context,
- what challenges they face,
- which teaching approaches they rely on in order to deal with these challenges.

During our research we talked to many teachers from all parts of Europe. The challenges they reported ranged from student apathy to hate speech by extremists. We assume that these different types of ‘classroom dilemmas’ (Stradling et al. 1984) can be found across Europe although probably to varying degrees and in varying forms. Taking this variation into account, we will first identify different types of controversies, challenges and approaches in order to clarify the situations teachers face and then classify the strategies they rely on when dealing with them.

## 2. Methodology

The methodological design of the needs assessment is based on strategic decisions taken on two different levels.

Firstly, we opted for a specific mode of triangulation, i.e. of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. As empirical studies on teaching controversial issues in history and civics classrooms are still in their infancy, with the bulk of publications either focusing on theoretical issues or offering practical guidelines, we started with an exploratory phase where

we attempted to identify the challenges, constraints and opportunities faced by teachers in daily practice. Conducting focus group discussions<sup>1</sup> with 33 participants from 25 countries, we opted to allow space for a loosely structured exchange of experiences among teachers. Only then did we invite teachers to comment on issues discussed in the academic literature. The categories we developed were based on the data we obtained in order to distinguish between different types of constraints and challenges as well as between the different strategies the teachers reported to rely on, thus contributing to a further refinement of existing concepts. On the basis of these findings we then developed, tested and refined an online questionnaire for a survey in order to measure the distribution of problem perceptions and preferences for different teaching strategies. In the end, we received answers from 117 participants coming from 26 different European countries.

Secondly, in terms of the recruiting strategies we pursued in gathering qualitative as well as quantitative data, we followed the ‘wisdom of practice’ study approach (Wineburg & Wilson 1988). The teachers participating in the focus group discussions as well as in the survey were contacted with the help of the EUROCLIO network and can thus be expected to belong to a group of engaged, motivated and experienced pedagogues. This approach appeared to be not only efficient in terms of resources, it also served our primary aims. We were interested in two things: On the one hand, we wanted to get hold of all the problems that may arise when using discussion, dialogue and debate as a means of teaching controversial issues in different types of classrooms. On the other hand, we wanted to explore what kind of innovative approaches creative and inventive teachers apply in the efforts to deal with these problems. With regard to both aims focusing on what can be expected to be good teachers appeared to be a good choice which enabled us ‘to learn from the possible, not only from the probable’ (Hess 2002: 15).

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<sup>1</sup> Three focus group interviews were conducted during a EUROCLIO workshop in Topola, Serbia (24.3.2018 and 25.3.2018), four during the annual EUROCLIO conference in Marseille, France (23.4.2018 and 25.4.2018) All interviews were conducted in English, recorded, transcribed and rendered anonymous. Each interview has been assigned a city code and a number (T 1-3 for interviews in Topola and M 1-4 for interviews in Marseille.) In addition, interviewees were given numbers relating to the order in which they spoke during the focus group discussions as well as a code indicating the country they work in (e.g. I2-Serbia). Finally we refer to the page number of the manuscript where the statement or the quote can be found. The interviews and the transcripts are archived at the Georg Eckert Institute. The authors may provide readers with access to the quoted passages from the interviews upon request, and in line with data protection guidelines.

### 3. Results and implications for the project

#### 3.1 Controversial issues

Issues can be controversial for many different reasons. Stradling et al. have introduced a distinction between controversies concerning disputed facts and controversies based on competing sets of values (1984: 2). The former are frequently dealt with in academic research while the latter are in many cases public matters causing division among laypersons (Kello 2016: 36).

The ‘Leaning to Disagree’ project predominantly addresses the latter category of controversial issues and defines them as ‘problems and disputes which divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values’ (Stradling 1984: 2).

In order to find out what history teachers perceive to be controversial issues, we asked them in the survey to name the two or three of the most controversial issues they had discussed in class during the previous twelve months. Among the 110 valid answers we identified the following clusters:

- Participants predominantly named **topics from the twentieth or twenty-first century**; themes from earlier centuries were hardly mentioned, with the sole exception of topics connected to colonialism (12 answers) or religion (6 answers).
- There is a clear preference for **national conflicts**. Participants from 19 out of 26 countries mentioned issues that concern national independence, sovereignty or borders (e.g. the Irish Civil War in 1922/1923, the Finish Civil War in 1918, the Cyprus conflict, the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, Brexit). Some of these issues were linked to challenges of fascism or communism (impact of the Munich Agreement on Slovakia, Soviet occupation of Georgia, Finnish-German relations in WWII). 18 named conflicts were from the twentieth century, 7 from the twenty-first century.
- Controversial issues with a **European or global reach from the twentieth century** concerned mainly wars, genocide and totalitarian regimes: World War I (5), fascism/National Socialism (10), World War II (12), the Holocaust (13), communism (9) and the Cold War (6).

- Among a broad range of different **contemporary political issues**, topics mentioned by the largest number of participants were migration (17), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (11), religion (5), terrorism (5) and feminism (5).

These findings are in line with recent research on history education and conflict. Mario Carretero for example stresses that ‘being recent and national are the main origins of the difficulties for teaching conflicting historical issues’ (2017: 353). Challenges involved in teaching the violent history of the twentieth century have so far been discussed with respect to the Holocaust, totalitarian regimes and wars (e.g. Meseth et al. 2004). While it is not surprising that recent issues stimulate more controversial discussions than events further in the past, the fact that contemporary *political* issues are regularly discussed in the history classroom is good news for a history education committed to critical thinking and to making the past relevant for the present.

### *Implications for the project*

- Our survey results support the topical choices made in the framework of our project. The topic of ‘Borders’ addresses a central aspect of historical and contemporary national conflicts, ‘Surviving under pressure’ deals with the historical experience of totalitarian regimes, the Holocaust or wars and ‘People on the move’ takes up the current political issue of migration.
- At the same time, these three topics represent different types of controversy and thus required the project group to offer different strategies for tackling them in classrooms with different societal contexts. The Council of Europe, for instance, distinguishes between long-standing issues such as sectarian divisions between differing groups on the one hand and very recent issues such as growing concern about religious extremism on the other (2015: 14). It argues that both types of issues confront teachers with different kinds of challenges. While the challenge with long-standing issues is to overcome apathy on behalf of the students and to say something new without alienating individuals or groups, the challenge with recent issues is more to find reliable information on the topic.

### 3.2 The role of discussions in history teaching

There is a consensus in the literature that dialogue, discussion and debate do play a significant role in promoting reasoned judgment as well as in enhancing students' ability to take part in deliberations regarding the common good (Barton & Levstik 2004). Discussions not only encourage students to make contributions of a higher order by engaging in explanations, justifications and the generation of hypotheses, they also teach them how to deal with multiple perspectives and uncertainty (Van Boxtel & Van Drie 2017: 574).

As we can see from the following table, a large majority of the teachers who participated in the survey have already internalised this message with almost 90% of them conducting discussions at least once a month.

*Question: How often do you INITIATE discussions in class?*

every week	once or twice a month	every other month	less than four times per year
57%	32.6%	9.3%	1.2%

As we know from empirical studies, the frequency of such discussions is not decisive. Much depends on preparation and the formats in which they are conducted (Hess 2009). Research has shown, for example, that discussions involving the whole class are frequently dominated by the teacher whereas initiating discussions in small groups leads not only to higher rates of participation among students (Husbands 1996) but also to higher levels of reasoning (Van Drie & Van Boxtel 2011, Elbers & Streefland 2000). In order to assess the quality of discussion conducted in diverse European classrooms we asked teachers to rate the following statements:

*Question: Preparing discussion in class...*

	always/often	sometimes/rarely
... I let students prepare the topic before the discussion.	48.8%	46.5%
... I form small groups before discussing a topic with the whole class.	41.8%	54.7%
... I use discussion formats where students take on assigned roles.	26.8%	71%

As we can see, only half the participants in our survey make regular use of different learner-centred strategies to structure discussions by preparing them individually, in small groups or by assigning roles.

Two further statements teachers were invited to rate were meant to gather information on the atmosphere of discussions. The Council of Europe (*Quality History Education* 2018) emphasises that learning environments are ‘particularly important for managing difficult dialogues or emotional exchanges and for allowing students to feel confident to voice their thoughts and disagreements’ (24). Focus group participants also reported that they had found changing the seating order or even leaving the classroom to be productive. Furthermore, they underlined the importance of discussion rules in creating an atmosphere in which all students feel safe.

*Question: Preparing discussion in class...*

	<b>always/often</b>	<b>sometimes/rarely</b>
... we leave the classroom and go to another space within school.	5.9%	87.2%
... I agree on rules for the discussion with students.	58.1%	37.2%

Since most participants agree discussion rules with their students always, often or at least sometimes, it can be concluded that they are aware how important procedures assuring fairness and respect during discussions are in terms of creating an enabling atmosphere. Given the practical difficulties it is not surprising that only a minority of 5.9 per cent always or often uses other spaces in school for discussions. This might also indicate, however, that most schools do not allow much room for the development of a discussion culture when taking decisions concerning the curricula and architectural design.

At the same time, a teacher from an International Baccalaureate (IB) school who took part in one of our focus group discussions and who conducts Socratic seminars on a regular basis, gave us a vivid illustration of how effectively all these different strategies can contribute to the development of a vibrant discussion culture:

Now I use Socratic seminars, and so students often are given a text before the lesson. And then they are assigned roles at the beginning. They have to prepare some questions beforehand. And one could be the discussion leader. And the idea is that they are for example given a text, a primary source. And they read it at home and then they come into class and we sit in a circle and one starts

talking about it, first of all you could start by saying, ‘Okay there's a central question I want to ask about a text,’ but then one says, ‘Okay, there's a word I did not understand. Can somebody explain that word to me?’ And then the discussion starts. And it's really, I'm just in the background. They moderate each other, they talk to each other, they explain to each other. And at the end we try to come up with a commonly agreed statement or question. So that works really well. Yeah. So, but they are trained in that. So they are trained already from middle school, so they start early onwards with these Socratic seminars. (M2\_I1-Cyprus)

### *Implications for the project*

- Given the successful implementation of the Socratic seminar, it can be concluded that receiving training in teaching strategies would enable teachers to better prepare and approach discussions. Yet, the example from an international school following the IB curriculum also shows that the development of a discussion culture is a long-term process. Therefore, the individual teacher would benefit from discussions as a format being strengthened in the (school) curriculum.

### **3.3 Assessment practices**

The project ‘Learning to Disagree’ works on the assumption that assessment needs to be integrated into teaching and should therefore be planned when a lesson is designed. The focus group discussions indicated that exam formats play a crucial role in the structure of assessments: teachers from countries where exams are geared towards historical reasoning are apparently used to teaching and assessing discussions, dialogue and debate to a greater extent than teachers from countries where this is not the case. The different concepts of exams were confirmed by the survey in which participants were asked whether exams focus on historical reasoning or on memorising facts.

*Question: In the centrally-designed exams...*

	<b>strongly agree/ agree</b>	<b>disagree strongly/ disagree</b>
...students predominantly have to show that they are able to reason historically.	58.1 %	32.6%
...students predominantly have to memorise facts.	64.1%	32.6%

The results can be interpreted thus: approximately one third of respondents stated that in centrally-designed exams, students do not have to show their ability to reason historically, but do have to memorise facts. Another third stated the opposite, that students do not have to memorise facts but must show that they can reason historically, while the last third said that exams focus both on memorising facts and historical reasoning.

Participants in the focus group discussions mentioned general challenges concerning assessment as well as specific challenges in the context of assessing discussion, dialogue and debate:

- Ideally, formative assessment should be used all the time by teachers to know where their students stand in order to improve their teaching. However, assessment is often equated with marking and grading, and even if it is not, the question remains of how formative assessment is linked to summative assessment.
- Where assigning marks is concerned, a lot of experience is needed to use the existing criteria models flexibly so that it is possible, for example, to acknowledge an outstanding answer that exceeds the assessment standards.
- Inclusive teaching challenges assessment routines. If some students receive additional support, appropriate to their needs, educators must ask whether it is fair, or indeed possible, to assess all students according to the same criteria.
- In the context of controversial and sensitive issues, most focus group participants agreed that values and opinions must not be assessed. Instead, the analysis, the argumentation and the use of facts should be marked. It is not always easy to draw the line, however, especially if the learning goals include values such as democracy. Similarly, emotional skills such as empathy are sometimes included in the learning goals but are almost impossible to assess.

The focus group participants underlined that it is helpful to collaborate with colleagues when assessing students' work. Models including standards, criteria and examples are indispensable, especially for beginners, but the participants pointed out that, in order to apply these models in a meaningful way, they need some scope to use their experience when marking.

### *Implications for the project*

- The lesson plans should be designed for single lessons in order to enable teachers that have to prepare their students for fact-oriented exams to cover the material in one lesson.
- Since teachers are not always sure how to conduct formative assessment, lesson plans should include suggestions for the assessment of discussion, dialogue and debate.

### **3.4 Constraints**

History teachers show different ways of dealing with controversial issues, which range from avoidance to risk-taking (Kitson & McCully 2005, Hess 2009, Kello 2016). If history education can contribute to a pluralistic democratic culture by encouraging pupils to discuss controversial issues it is crucial to find out what hinders teachers from doing so. Therefore, survey participants were asked which of the following list of factors made it difficult for them to discuss controversial issues in class.

*Question: Do the following factors make it difficult for you to discuss controversial issues in class? If so, to what extent would you agree?*

	<b>always/often</b>	<b>sometimes/rarely</b>
lack of resources representing different viewpoints	57%	43.1%
one-dimensional textbooks	51.2%	44.2%
duty of neutrality	51.1%	45.3%
strong nationalism in society	43%	54.6%
political pressure by authorities	36.1%	60.4%
complaints from parents	34%	64%
tight state control over teaching content	33.2%	66.3%
discouraging atmosphere in school	31.4%	62.8%

The results show that a lack of resources representing different viewpoints, and one-dimensional textbooks were perceived to be the biggest constraints. The access to usable material illustrating multiple perspectives – however commonsensical the approach may be – seems to present an obstacle for many teachers across Europe. Focus group discussions indicated that the problem was more acute in some countries than in others:

- A Greek participant pointed to the fact that all history teachers have to work with the same textbook, which rarely contains the perspective of the ‘other’ side (T2\_I2\_Greece, p. 25).
- A Turkish teacher reported that they are permitted to use materials other than the official textbook but it is often difficult to find alternative perspectives in Turkish (T1\_I1\_Turkey, p. 16) while a French (T1\_I2\_France, p. 19) and a Danish (T1\_I4\_Denmark, p. 19) teacher stated that there are usually a few sources illustrating different perspectives in their textbooks.

Other constraints listed by the teachers point to the difficult position they occupy between the state, society and parents:

- 51 per cent stated that the duty of neutrality they feel obliged to is an important reason for avoiding controversial issues.
- 36 per cent stated that they were exposed to pressure by authorities. This is a surprisingly high share of teachers given that most of the participants came from democratic states.
- A significant minority of 43 per cent mentioned strong nationalism in society which reflects the current European-wide trend of nationalist revival.
- Complaints from parents were still mentioned by 34 per cent of the participants.

Three examples from focus group participants illustrate how teachers and at times even students are faced with political pressure exercised either by an authoritarian state or by a nationalist society:

- A colleague from Russia recounted a concrete situation during which a student of hers, recognising the clear contradiction between the official knowledge taught in school and the common understanding shared by many people, openly asked her how he should deal with this contradiction. The teacher explained to us that she felt honoured on the one hand by the students’ interest in her opinion but rather helpless on the other as she knew he would fail the exam if he deviated from the standard narrative. (M2\_I3\_Russia, p. 15)
- A teacher from Montenegro recounted how, of all his students the one awarded the best marks cited the convicted war criminal Radko Mladic as a role model – apparently influenced by media discourses describing him as a hero and a victim (T2\_I3\_Montenegro, p. 13).

- A teacher from the UK mentioned that right-wing politicians tend to criticise how the history of colonialism is taught in schools nowadays, claiming it undermines national pride. He moreover drew attention to recent training on Preventing Violent Extremism which he perceived to be ‘hugely problematic’ because it could be understood to oblige teachers to report on every student who was able to justify armed insurrections against the state (M1\_I4\_UK, 19).

These examples illustrate that the position teachers occupy between state, society and parents, and the specific challenges arising from this situation may vary significantly between different societal contexts. Specific dynamics in a particular class may furthermore have a crucial impact on how these challenges inform everyday practices. Accordingly, there is no one solution to overcoming these constraints. Teachers should rather be enabled to reflect on their own position and to choose from a broader repertoire of strategies and approaches when teaching controversial issues.

### *Implications for the project*

- While the overall aim of the ‘Learning to disagree’ project responds to the lack of resources by creating materials with a variety of viewpoints, the question of language appears to be crucial. The translation of the materials would make them more widely usable, as confirmed by several focus group participants.
- Teacher training should focus on the participants’ specific challenges when teaching controversial issues and convey possible approaches.
- In order to strengthen teachers’ readiness to let their students discuss controversial issues, discussion, dialogue and debate should be valued as democratic practices by education policies.

### **3.5 Teaching approaches: setting limits**

In addition to identifying what hinders teachers from dealing with controversial issues we asked them about their actual experiences and teaching practices. We wanted teachers to reflect on their teaching approaches on different levels.

First of all, we wanted their opinion on the overall rules that teachers implement to structure discussions and to define what they themselves or students are entitled to do or say. With regard to both themselves and students, the limits can be either narrow or broad. Teachers can feel obliged to act as neutral moderators or they may feel the need to let students know what they think. Teachers can decide to listen to students even when they express extreme positions or they can insist on ending the discussion as soon as racist or sexist comments are made.

### *The role of teachers*

Looking at the role of the teacher and the constraints they face we know from the literature (Stradling 1984: 111f., Hess 2009: 97-110, CoE 2015: 47f.) that both types of strategies involve risks as well as opportunities.

There are several advantages to the teacher making his or her position known:

- it replaces the guesswork for students trying to figure out what their teacher thinks;
- as soon as they are in the open, students can discount their teacher's prejudices;
- teachers can maintain credibility by stating their opinion like everybody else in class is encouraged to do.

There are of course also potential disadvantages:

- teachers can stifle classroom discussion because students would be afraid to argue against his or her line of thinking;
- other students may feel compelled to oppose the teacher and thus to support a position they do not really believe in;
- students may have difficulty distinguishing between situations when the teacher is purveying facts and situations when she or he is simply offering his or her opinion.

Adopting the role of an impartial chairperson also has potential strengths:

- it minimises undue influence by the teacher and his or her biases;
- it gives everyone a chance to take part in the discussion without too much consideration of how to please the teacher;
- it provides space for questions and arguments the teacher may not have considered.

Of course this approach also has weaknesses:

- students may find it artificial;
- it can damage the rapport between teacher and class;
- it underlines the power asymmetry between students expected to speak up and teachers declining to do so;
- it may reinforce students' existing attitudes and prejudices if the teacher does not intervene at all;
- the role of a neutral chairperson may not suit the teacher's personality.

The survey results offer a rather mixed picture.

*Question: During discussions...*

	always/often	sometimes rarely
... I limit myself to the role of a neutral moderator	62.8%	36%
... I let students know my own views	41.9%	58.1%

If we look at these figures, we can see that the majority, almost two thirds, of teachers opted for the role of neutral moderator, while a minority, just over a third, of teachers would rather let their students know what they themselves think about a matter. As there seems to be no great overlap between these two camps, we may want to emphasise in line with recent findings (Hess 2009: 9) that there are no wrong or right approaches with regard to this question.

### *Implications for the project*

- In the teaching guides we produce, it may be advisable to encourage teachers to be flexible with regard to the disclosure of their own position, adapting their role to the changing needs of the individual class and the challenges involved in encouraging discussion about different topics.
- Finally, we may want to focus on raising teachers' awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of both options in order to enable them to make better informed decisions and more effectively manage any risks.

### *The role of the students*

During discussions, teachers sometimes have to decide whether to listen to students even when they are stating extremist or aggressive views or whether to close the discussion. In some situations, they may face a dilemma. They have to choose between two equally plausible but mutually exclusive options. Do they focus attention on the student who is making extremist statements and offer a space for that student to express him- or herself as well as providing the intellectual guidance he or she might need? Or do they primarily take care of those students in class who might feel offended or marginalised by extremist statements? In that case, should they inhibit the expression of such statements (Crombie & Rowe 2009: 8)? We wanted to find out how the survey participants would normally deal with this dilemma and thus invited them to rate the following scenarios:

*Question: When dealing with students that display stereotypical thinking or extremist views...*

	<b>always/often</b>	<b>sometimes/rarely</b>
... I listen to the opinions of the students first – even if they are extreme.	86,1%	13,9%
... I close the discussion if students display racist or sexist prejudices in class.	31,4%	60,4%

The answers show a clear preference by participants to listen to students even if their views diverge from the democratic consensus. This situation obviously appeals to teachers' perception of themselves as educators helping young people to grow up in a difficult world. This role includes trying to connect with students and preventing them from slipping into extremism – through attempts to be provocative perhaps, or even without a great deal of thought. The large amount of teachers stating they would allow students to air such opinions may also reflect that if teachers want to take up controversial issues in their classrooms, they are aware that they cannot start by silencing students and, as a result, push them to self-censorship (CoE 2015: 17). The readiness of teachers to listen to students corresponds with their unwillingness to close discussions if students display racist or sexist prejudices. Statements heard in the focus group discussions indicate that most teachers would not tolerate such statements but would in most cases try to challenge the prejudices. 'As a teacher, you need to listen to the students and try to make them think', as one participant put it (T3\_I3\_Hungary, p. 10). The survey results indicate that many polled teachers are prepared to reach out a long way to students with extremist views. Focus group participants also shared experiences with students that just kept repeating neo-Nazi statements and shut themselves off

when they were confronted with other arguments in discussions; still, the teachers would try to open them up, sometimes by organising voluntary discussions with external moderators. On the other hand, of the polled teachers one third said they were sensitive to arguments going too far and worry about the protection of other students that may be offended or marginalised by extremist statements. One focus group participant underlined the importance of the limits of free speech, saying ‘and in Denmark we very much uphold free speech. But of course there are things that you cannot say in the classroom. You cannot joke about violence against women. Of course you cannot. So. And I always think that maybe it's not even such a bad thing that I have to put my foot down. Maybe it's not. Because it kind of trains them in, there is a limit. You have to be aware of the surroundings, right?’ (T1\_I4\_Denmark, p. 14).

### *Implications for the project*

- The project should take into account that it is the nature of controversial discussions to explore the limits of freedom of speech. In order to have pedagogical scope it can be necessary to let students express their prejudiced opinions and then engage with them. It seems crucial, though, that the discussion rules set up beforehand are not open to contestation. They should be designed in a way to protect students who could become the target of extremist positions.
- Teacher training should raise teachers’ awareness of how dominant discourses in their respective societies set the limits of what can legitimately be said and what cannot. At the same time, they should be supported in developing strategies for situations in which students cross those lines. Teachers should also be sensitised to the harm that could be done to students who might be offended and marginalised when boundaries are overstepped. They thus should be enabled to balance pedagogical commitment and protection in every situation.

### **3.6 Teaching approaches: encouraging critical thinking, ‘battling’ stereotypes and creating empathy**

On yet another level, we asked for teachers’ preferences with regard to three broad types of approaches, all of which are rooted in the same tradition of enquiry-based teaching while placing emphasis on slightly different aspects.

- The first approach could be described in classical terms as **encouraging critical thinking**.
- The second one could be labelled '**battling**' stereotypes, to pick up a phrase used by one of the participants in our focus-group discussions.
- The third could be classified as **creating empathy**, an approach that was mentioned in the 1980s but has been recently rediscovered in studies bridging the intersection between history education and conflict transformation.

Before we present and discuss the survey results, we will

- provide a brief overview of recent debates on history teaching in order to shed light on the rationale behind each of the approaches,
- illustrate how we translated the general ideas and principles into concrete items for the survey and
- quote stories told to us by teachers during the focus group discussions, in order to illustrate how the different approaches inspire specific teaching practices.

### *Encouraging critical thinking*

Roughly speaking, the academic debate on how to teach controversial issues has evolved in three stages. The very first phase was dominated by the **enquiry based approach**, consisting of two pillars, which taught students how to critically assess sources and drew their attention to the difference between the past and history. Obviously, this concept was embedded in the disciplinary historical thinking approach and meant to transform history teaching in general, overcoming the 'romantic' single narrative approach (Carretero 2017: 347f.). Although mainly emphasising two different aspects of multi-perspectivity, researchers were quick to adapt this approach to the special needs of teaching about controversial issues (McCully 2012).

Exposing students to different views *from* the past and drawing their attention to the fact that different people might have experienced the same events and developments quite differently is expected to do three things:

- to render history more complex (Barton & McCully 2012, McCully 2012),

- to enable students to move beyond the black and white pictures often painted by rival communities (Hedley & Markowitz 2001) and
- to comprehend that supposedly natural communities were much more driven by internal conflicts than commonly held stereotypes may suggest (Carretero 2017).

Presenting students with multiple accounts *on* the past as produced in the present and under the influence of present needs, is said to bring about the recognition of the often marginalised voices of minorities (McCully 2012). It is assumed that tasking students with critically assessing those accounts and drawing their attention to the motives, interests, beliefs and intentions inscribed into them (Stradling et al. 1984), will turn them into ‘bias busters’ and will teach them how to distinguish between opinion and fact (Crombie & Rowe 2009).

In the survey we translated the concept into three points and asked teachers whether they encourage their students

- to rethink the plausibility of their arguments,
- to research whether their prejudices are based on facts and
- to be aware of the logical consequences of their thinking.

One rather successful example from a history lesson that could be perceived as implementing all three principles was given to us by a teacher from Cyprus (M2\_I2\_Cyprus, p. 16f.). She presented her university students with two competing accounts on the British takeover of Cyprus in the nineteenth century. The first account stressed how eager the British were to get hold of Cyprus as the Valley of the Earth wanted by all, very much in line with hegemonic textbook stories. The second account examined the bigger picture, pointing out that the transfer of Cyprus from the Ottoman to the British Empire was not exceptional at all, but rather took place during a time when the whole European map was changing.

As we can learn from this example and from the literature, the whole approach is based on the assumption that, if students gain a deeper factual understanding, learn about multiple perspectives and thus also experience the limits of historical knowledge, they will also change their attitudes towards conflict partners (Bilali & Mahmoud 2017: 85, Carretero 2017: 355). Some empirical research in Israel seems to confirm this assumption by showing that critical disciplinary teaching can indeed contribute to curbing the biasing influences of political affiliations among both Israeli and Arab students (Goldberg 2017). Implied is the construction of a binary opposition between social memory and history as an academic discipline, an

opposition supported by many, mainly historians such as Nora (1989: 8) and Lowenthal (2000: 68) but questioned by those such as Wertsch (2002: 20) or Cornelißen (2010). Whereas social memory is suspected of reinforcing unchallenged partisan images of the past, the critical historical approach is credited with casting a dispassionate view on the past.

Criticism of the critical thinking approach has been expressed on three different grounds:

- Some researchers, such as Michalinos Zembylas from Greece and Zvi Bekerman from Israel (2008), took issue with the core assumption. They questioned the epistemological divide between history and memory, pointing out that both are based on socially conditioned, conscious and unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion.
- Others, such as Chikoko (2011), argued that an approach that puts too much emphasis on the difference between adequate and inadequate approaches to the past may discourage students from participating in the discussion because they may fear that their teachers would accuse them of being biased.
- A third type of criticism is built on empirical observations made mainly in Northern Ireland where an enquiry-based approach and the clear commitment to expose students to different views was embedded in the history curriculum as early as 1991. Here several studies (Barton & McCully 2010, McCully 2003, McCully 2012, McCully & Reilly 2017) have come to the conclusion that approaches focusing on the promotion of a rational critique alone are not sufficient to sever the strong emotional ties students have to particular cultural positions they share with members of their respective communities. Very much in line with these insights, a study from Israel has shown how deeply the way students read and perceive textbook accounts is affected by their political background and that of their parents (Porat 2004). Researchers have additionally argued that when emotional aspects are ignored it can block or hinder rational thinking (McCully 2003, McCully & Reilly 2017).

These different criticisms have prepared the ground for the emergence of two complementary approaches.

### *Battling stereotypes*

The first complementary approach still insists on a rational appraisal of facts and arguments, while adding a slightly more confrontational stance. Teachers would be tasked with spreading what was called ‘dangerous memory’ (Zembylas & Bekerman 2008). The term was coined to describe a practice of teaching the past that primarily attempts to disrupt common-sense assumptions by either referring to the suffering of the other or by providing space for heterogeneous stories of the we-group.

A key feature of this approach is thus the determination to purposefully preselect those facts and stories for classroom discussion that are likely to do two things simultaneously: to catch students by surprise and to battle stereotypes. As a result, researchers assume, students would not only be involved emotionally but would also be pulled out of routines requiring them to either rehearse the same old stories they have heard since childhood or to adopt the ‘enlightened’ position they feel their teachers are expecting from them.

In the survey we translated the concept into three items asking teachers whether they would

- challenge their students’ lack of knowledge of minorities,
- confront them with the wrongdoings of the we-group and
- confront them with the impact of stereotypes on minorities.

During the focus group discussions we heard the following illustrative stories:

- A teacher from Macedonia pointed out, that he often uses a ‘strategy of shocking’ and provoking his students in order to make them a ‘bit softer’. As they often think that their ethnic group is better than others he would give them examples ‘where the others are better than us’ like a famous Roma box champion or an Albanian Nobel prize winner (T2\_I4\_Macedonia, p. 31).
- A teacher from Greece mentioned a colleague of hers who showed his students a film shedding light on the atrocities committed by Greek freedom fighters during their fight against the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century (T2\_I2/Greece, p. 17).
- A teacher from Serbia who stated at the beginning that she is always prepared ‘for a good fight’ in order to prevent her class from ‘having a nice nap’, recalled a lesson during which she first tasked her students with collecting all the stereotypes they could think of against Albanians, and then asked them whether, if they were Albanian

themselves, they would like to stay in a country where people thought about them that badly (T2\_I5\_Serbia, p. 36).

### *Creating empathy*

The second alternative to the critical thinking approach also starts with the observation that what is most lacking is curiosity on behalf of the students to *really* get to understand the perspectives of the other. From the perspective of researchers who have studied history teaching in Northern Ireland (McCully 2003, 2005, 2012, Barton & McCully 2010), this lack of curiosity is reproduced by a type of history teaching that avoids provoking emotional reactions. In order to make a difference, they argue, teaching should leave the ‘comfort zone’ in which texts are supposed to speak for themselves. Teachers should explicitly aim to engage students emotionally because people need to be encouraged to care first, if they are expected to make the considerable effort to understand another person (McCully 2012).

Though coming from a different background, Goldberg (2017) arrives at similar conclusions. Having explored how Arab and Jewish students in Israel respond to differently composed teaching units on the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 and the emergence of the Palestinian refugee problem, he comes up with the interesting finding that both groups, probably due to their differing positions within Israeli society, benefit to varying degrees from different strategies. Whereas a critical thinking approach had the biggest impact on Jewish students, encouraging them to accept responsibility for wrong-doings of ‘their’ group, the more emotional dual-narrative approach proved to be more effective with the Arab students. Apparently, members of the dominant group benefit from an impartial, academic approach. But members of the marginalised minority seem to need recognition first, before they are prepared to risk rethinking the partisan stories they grew up with.

In the survey we translated the concept into two items asking teachers whether they would:

- help students to understand the other position,
- draw attention to achievements of marginalised/excluded groups.

It is probably no coincidence that one of the illustrative examples given during our focus group discussions of an approach aimed at raising empathy came from a Danish teacher who had visited Northern Ireland in a professional capacity. Coming home to Denmark, she showed her students a video from Northern Ireland showing a Protestant and a Catholic girl

switching school uniforms for a day. As these uniforms clearly function as markers of religious identity, the girls felt rather uncomfortable when they took a walk in their home town together. In the words of the Danish teacher, both girls ‘were trying to put themselves in the other person's shoes and see what their lives were like’. To her students, she continued, this exercise in empathy set in motion a thorough process of critical self-examination as they were asking themselves whether they do the same as the spectators in the film, judging and making assumptions about other people based solely on how they look. (T1\_I4\_Denmark, p. 27)

### *Discussion of the survey results*

	always/often	sometimes/rarely
rethinking plausibility of arguments	79%	21%
researching whether prejudices are based on facts	77.9%	20.9%
drawing attention to logical consequences of thinking	75.6%	22.1%
confronting students with the impact of stereotypes on minorities	73.3%	25.6
challenging students’ lack of knowledge on minorities	65.1%	32.6%
confronting students with wrongdoings of their own group	52.3%	43%
helping students to understand the other position	87.2%	12.8
drawing attention to achievements of marginalised/ excluded groups	50%	38.4%

Looking at these figures, we can see that all three types of approaches receive similar approval rates from the teachers we polled. We view this as an indicator that there is a lot of overlap, meaning that the same teacher may encourage critical thinking, create empathy or opt for a more confrontational approach, depending – maybe – at times on the composition or atmosphere in class or on the teacher’s own mood, or at other times on the topic under discussion.

- There seem to be only two exceptions to this general rule. The item *drawing attention to achievements of marginalised/excluded groups* polled lower than the others with only 50 per cent saying they regularly did this. We can only speculate here about the reasons, but one explanation could be that some teachers reject such a deliberate effort

at lauding the other because it may be viewed as patronising. This would resonate well with the common idea that one should not reduce marginalised groups to their role as victims of exclusion but rather stress their capability to act.

- The second item that polled significantly lower than the others is the idea *to confront students with the wrongdoing of one's own group*. Some teachers may perceive this approach as being at odds with the idea that teachers as civil servants paid by the state are obliged to be neutral. The participants' reserve could also be explained by teachers' experience-based psychological knowledge that it is easier for students to first become aware of their own traumatic feelings and then empathise with the 'other' before they are able to challenge the ideological truth of their own in-group (Zembylas & Karahasan 2017: 33).

Summing up, the results of our survey confirm an interesting statement made by Johnson in 1998. On the basis of his involvement in anti-racist education in Australia, he would abstain from arguing in favour of either a rational or an emotional approach. He would rather point to the advantages and disadvantages involved in both of them. If teaching does not address feelings, he argues, it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant. According to his observations, in a rational setting students would frequently try to please their teachers instead of expressing their real opinions. However, if emotions dominate, he continues, students may well retreat into what he calls 'tribal positions'. During our focus group discussions a teacher from the UK came to a similar conclusion. Looking back at his experience of what can go wrong in a history or politics lesson when you try to engage your students in discussing controversial or sensitive issues, he formulated a convincing pledge for a flexible approach adapted as much as possible to the specific challenges that come up in class:

You have to decide based on your knowledge of the children what's going to be best. But what it boils down to is that teenagers usually are not very good at having debates or discussions that lie in the middle of the spectrum from 'outright angry disagreement' to 'very, very staged, formulaic, boring debates'. So I tried to set debates up in my history lessons and they would often end up just quite boring. Because everyone really sort of agreed on everything anyway, because they were only debating because I told them to debate. And you wouldn't necessarily get much value from it. Then at the other end of the spectrum is when they really disagreed, and it would go kind of out of control and you would not get the learning you wanted to get, and instead you'd just get a room of angry and upset children who then go and complain to their parents or whatever. And the difficult thing for teachers, I guess, whether they're starting teachers, or whether they are very experienced teachers, is knowing your groups

well enough to feel confident in allowing a debate to happen in the middle and to just kind of nudge it back to get us into the middle. (M1\_I4\_UK, p. 13)

### *Implications for the project*

- Translating these insights into conceptual ideas that could guide our work on the teaching materials that we prepare in the course of the project, we would recommend offering a variety of approaches for all source materials switching between tasks and set-ups that either encourage students to engage in critical thinking, challenge the common-sense-assumptions they bring to class or create empathy with others.
- When designing learning outcomes for single lesson plans we may alternatively wish to put emphasis on different ‘competences for democratic culture’ as outlined in a conceptual model by the Council of Europe (2017) and displayed on the four wings of the butterfly model (CoE 2017: 38). At times we may want to focus on values and attitudes and at other times on cognitive skills and knowledge.
- The survey indicates that many teachers have a repertoire of teaching strategies that allows them to react to emotions in the classroom. However, given the constraints mentioned by participants with regard to controversial and sensitive issues and the dominance of the disciplinary approach, we assume that many teachers would benefit from training that helps them develop fresh ideas on how to deal with emotions in the classroom.

## **4. Conclusion**

Our research allowed us to identify different types of controversial issues as well as respective challenges and approaches from a diverse range of experiences that were reported to us by teachers in focus group discussions. These experiences also made us more aware of the importance of the situational context. We support the thinking of Stradling et al. (1984) and Hess (2009) in emphasising that there is no one right way to help students to acquire social and civic competences through dialogue, debate and discussion on contested issues.

Since we had the privilege of talking to committed and experienced educators we were able to identify a range of strategies outlining how to deal with controversial issues, some of which involve emotional approaches while others focus on reason. The survey points to the

dominance of the critical thinking approach which is an integral part of history as an academic discipline. Furthermore, schools are institutions where emotions should be restrained, rational approaches should be opened up and social interaction should be guided by mutual respect – all of which is crucial to render schools safe spaces. Both the disciplinary and the institutional contexts encourage teachers to rely on rational approaches to controversial issues which can be helpful in some situations but may not appeal to students in others. When dealing with controversial issues teachers are faced with the dilemma that meaningful discussions depend on the exchange of rational arguments but also, to a certain degree, on participants' emotional involvement.

In conclusion, we would like to address this dilemma by underlining two points. Firstly, if discussions are planned, the preparation should be as careful as possible. Students should prepare the topic individually or in groups, a teaching strategy should be chosen, rules should be agreed on and the room should be arranged to fit the strategy. All this should create an atmosphere where fairness prevails, students feel encouraged to speak their mind and a discussion culture can develop. However, this kind of rational set-up might not always work. If emotional discussions spring up spontaneously and students express extremist opinions or withdraw, teachers have to take the emotional level into account more than usual. Therefore, we believe that teachers, secondly, should be better enabled to deal with controversy by reflecting upon and, if necessary, broadening their repertoire of strategies. While these challenges are not completely new for educators, they have gained a new quality in a world where established facts are publicly contested, conspiracy theories are promoted and nationalist resentments are refuelled by populists.

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