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## LEARNING TO DISAGREE: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**There is a general consensus among specialists in history and civic education that it is important to prepare students to navigate plural societies in an increasingly divisive and polarised world. An effective means of achieving this end is to teach them how to deal with controversial issues and how to disagree while still respecting one another. This includes equipping students to identify and reject false claims or conspiracy theories.**

International organisations such as the Council of Europe (CoE 2015, 2018a, 2018b) and Oxfam (2018) have highlighted a number of points in their recommendations and guidelines which stress the importance of teaching goals that:

- teach students critical thinking skills by (i) exposing them to a variety of viewpoints especially on contested issues, (ii) encouraging them to distinguish between facts and opinions, (iii) tasking them with checking whether statements are coherent, relevant and evidence-based and (iv) enabling them to recognise the viewpoint behind the positions they encounter;
- enable students to be empathetic with others on a cognitive level, in terms of comprehending their thoughts, beliefs and perceptions, as well as on an affective level, in terms of understanding their feelings and needs;
- are guided by values and attitudes such as respect for human rights, diversity, democracy and the rule of law, willingness to suspend judgement of other peoples' world views as well as tolerance for ambiguity and acceptance of complexity.

The guidelines emphasise the need to avoid one-size-fits-all solutions in teaching strategies, and to flexibly weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the above points. The specialists also highlight the importance of examining and considering the specific needs and challenges of each individual classroom, particularly in terms of:

### About 'Learning to Disagree':

These policy recommendations are based on the ERASMUS+ project 'Learning to Disagree' (2017-2020), funded by the European Union. The project aimed to help teachers respond appropriately when faced with extreme opinions or false information brought to the classroom by students, and to support them when addressing controversial or sensitive issues in history and politics lessons. It encouraged teachers to lead structured discussions during which pupils could practise social and civic competences. To this end, the project partners developed teaching materials that employ multiple perspectives from which to explore historic and political issues, they also created a teachers' guide that details discussion formats and evaluation criteria, and offered workshops for teachers.

The project was conducted jointly by EuroClio (the Netherlands), the Mount School in York (United Kingdom), Edukacija za 21. vek (Serbia), the Maynooth University (Ireland), and the Georg Eckert Institute (Germany) which contributed a study on the experiences, practices and approaches of history and civics teachers from 25 European countries in terms of teaching controversial issues (Christophe & Tribukait 2019).

### Teachers' guide:

<https://www.euroclio.eu/resource/teachers-guide-learning-to-disagree/>

### Teaching materials:

<https://historiana.eu/historical-content>

- whether teachers should remain neutral or disclose their own point of view in discussions with students;
- whether students should always be given complete freedom to express themselves or whether limits should be set and, if so, at what point.

The recommendations in this document, which are based on an analysis of academic debates and of focus-group discussions with 33 history educators from 25 countries (Christophe/Tribukait 2019), build on these shared insights, but also raise other salient issues that would benefit from further reflection.

### TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IS IMPORTANT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

The concept of incorporating critical thinking into history teaching emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. During that period, the conflict between capitalism and socialism was superimposed on to all other issues, and critical thinking was a concept that highlighted the need to look beyond ideology and to think independently. Since 1989, European societies have become more heterogeneous and socially fragmented, with more fluid identities. Globalisation has furthermore reached new levels and as a result we are living in an ever more interconnected world and our attention is more often drawn to events and discourses from far-flung countries, which are of increasing relevance to us. The concept of critical thinking consequently needs adjusting in order to remain constructive in the pluralistic, globalised and increasingly polarised European societies of today.

As soon as we focus on historical thinking in terms of practical application in the history classroom rather than as a theoretical concept, we realise the eminent role that cultural frames and common-sense assumptions play in the process of perceiving and interpreting the past. Some studies on history education in Germany indicate that implicit ideas such as nationalism, Eurocentrism and racism still inform the interpretation and representation of history, despite explicit commitments to equality and tolerance. One example in a German history textbook critically addresses the German colonial genocide of the Hereros and Nama in Namibia, while at the same time describing the Nama as a belligerent tribe that were prone to steal from others. The still deeply ingrained stereotypes of wild African tribes appear to blind the authors to the more plausible application of that label to colonial invaders such as the Germans, who were brutally killing, looting and pilfering the resources of others in the course of the violent colonial project (Mielke 2020). It appears that the process of teaching and learning history is not only guided by disciplinary models and procedures, it is

also a culturally contingent practice that is largely shaped by implicit assumptions and ideas that are not usually subject to conscious reflection.

While the concept of critical thinking is well suited to addressing evidence the same cannot be said for its ability to tackle issues of relevance. In the history classroom, encounters with the past are usually subject to enormous time pressure and therefore tough decisions have to be made regarding which historical facts are considered of pivotal relevance and which are deemed to be less important. A recent study (Christophe/Ritzer forthcoming) found, that when making decisions regarding relevance, teachers tend to be influenced by powerful, but largely unconsciously invoked, cultural frames of interpretation. In lessons about the Vietnam War, for example, some teachers would place the war in the framework of a North-South conflict and consequently emphasise the confrontation between colonial France and the Viet Minh in the 1950s, whereas others would apply the framework of the East-West conflict and focus on the confrontation between the USA and North Vietnam, supported as it was by the PRC and the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s.

**Recommendations:** History teaching should adopt a more multi-perspective approach and become more reflexive and transparent.

- *Offering multiple perspectives:* Source materials should include differing and opposing positions on contested issues. Teachers should also discuss with students how the definition of what constitutes a legitimate perspective is frequently disputed.
- *Making selections more transparent:* When dealing with controversial issues, teachers and textbook authors need to carefully reflect on the epistemological, ethical, political and pedagogical criteria used to choose narratives and viewpoints: those that include false claims, for example, may not be suitable unless students are able, and encouraged, to check the facts. If viewpoints are disrespectful towards certain groups, students need to be provided with the tools to deconstruct the use of language or the framing of facts, and to question them. There is no general rule stipulating how to decide which material is suitable or unsuitable, since it depends on the specific learning goals. It may be instructive to work in the classroom with material containing false claims because students are confronted with such content outside school; however, particular effort will most likely be required to enable students to scrutinise it.
- *Reflecting how facts are framed:* Teachers should illustrate how opinions often employ only those facts

deemed relevant. They should furthermore explain how they themselves, or the textbooks they use, frame and categorise facts. Students should be made aware that every story about the past is based on some facts being emphasised and others omitted and that no version can be considered exhaustive.

- *Reflecting on one's own viewpoint:* Accordingly, students should be invited to reflect on why, and based on which values, they come to the conclusion that some facts are more relevant than others to them personally or the group they belong to.

### TEACHING VALUES IS IMPORTANT, BUT NOT ENOUGH

The liberal democratic consensus that emerged after 1989 is currently being challenged by populists and many European societies are divided over which values should prevail. Consequently, teachers must carefully tread a thin line between two competing demands when discussing controversial issues in class. While they should insist that basic values of democratic societies such as human dignity, human rights, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law are respected, they should also provide their students with an opportunity to express opinions that reflect their personal and potentially diverging ethics.

Furthermore, in democratic societies where not all political parties share democratic values, where antisemitism and racism have become more popular and where extremist conspiracy theories find increasing support, it has become more difficult to conduct debates and the following challenges may arise:

- How can conflicting values and multiple perspectives be reconciled; for example, recognising pluralism whilst acknowledging the validity of certain truth claims?
- How can shared values be translated into concrete political guidelines, with regards to migration or border disputes for example?
- What to do when a commitment to upholding human rights would dictate the imposition of sanctions on a regime with a record of violating these rights, while economic interests support the expansion of mutually beneficial trade relations with the same regime?

**Recommendations:** Instead of students being told which values are important they should be invited to explore the challenges faced when trying to make value-based decisions.

- *Discussing open issues:* In order to prepare students to navigate a complex and challenging world, they should be equipped to cope with ambiguity, to accept that answers are not set in stone and to nevertheless adopt a position. This might be achieved by presenting them with genuinely open-ended questions for discussion and debate: questions that do not have ready answers and which reflect a range of challenging situations.
- *Weighing values and interests:* In political discussions, arguments centred on values often clash with those centred on interests. Students should be encouraged to explore both types of arguments. If only values are highlighted and interest-driven positions are excluded or quickly dismissed, classroom debates may seem detached from society and appear irrelevant to students. Instead it is desirable to conduct open discussions, acknowledging that interests and values must be individually weighed in every case. One example of a current political debate is the European Union's migration policy, which can be criticised in terms of human rights violations or presented as a means to limit immigration.
- *Perceiving ambiguity and complexity:* Students should be introduced to historical figures or agents that defy easy categorisation as either victims or perpetrators of unjust regimes. A good case in point would be certain Eastern European figures who crossed what is considered to be a clear-cut line between being a supporter and being an opponent of a socialist regime. This would refer to rulers such as János Kádár, the head of the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party who was imprisoned in Stalinist times yet orchestrated the crack-down on the 1956 uprising, as well as to some dissidents who had been party members before they unknowingly violated the rules of what could legitimately be said.

### CONCLUSION

Teaching history and civics has become more complicated in the face of rising populism and increasing polarisation in European societies. Such trends reinforce the importance of teaching critical thinking skills that enable students to distinguish facts from false claims in public debates, whilst the new societal challenges also present an opportunity to reflect on and further develop current history and civics education. We believe that space and time for reflection could be helpful on two levels:

Firstly, teachers, curriculum designers, textbook authors and other individuals or institutions responsible for history and civics education are encouraged to deal



with controversial issues. Given the risks associated with introducing controversial topics to the classroom, educators should prepare and design such lessons carefully. This includes presenting a broad variety of viewpoints to students, making selection criteria for material and narrative frames as transparent as possible and encouraging students to critically examine the evidence as well as the relevance of arguments.

Secondly, it may be necessary to reflect upon how the discussion of a controversial issue is developing during the lesson. In cases where there is dissonance, simplification or confrontation, teachers and students might benefit from a pause in usual teaching practices to reflect on the interaction at a meta-level. During these breaks, students and teachers should be encouraged to reflect on how their statements and positions are shaped on one hand by different values and interests and on the other by different ways of categorising actors, options for action and contexts. Making explicit what often remains implicit may help participants of classroom discussions and debates to first understand and then to tolerate the other, ultimately working to overcome polarisation.

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