



Learning to Disagree

Policy Recommendations

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INDEPENDENT. THINKING.

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Specialists in history and civic education agree on the need to prepare students for navigating a plural but increasingly divisive and polarized world. Teaching them how to deal with controversial issues and how to disagree while still respecting the other, has been singled out as an adequate means to that end. This involves – among others - preparing students to identify and reject false claims or conspiracy theories.

Beyond that general agreement, international organizations like the UNESCO, the Council of Europe (CoE 2015, 2018, 2018a) or Oxfam (2018) have furthermore settled on a couple of more concrete points in their recommendations and guidelines:

With regard to the goals of teaching, they have stressed the necessity

- to teach students critical thinking skills by (i) exposing them to a variety of viewpoints with regard to crucial and contested issues, (ii) encouraging them to distinguish between facts and opinions, (iii) tasking them to check whether statements are coherent, relevant and evidence based (iv) enabling them to recognize the vantage point and the point of view on which the positions they encounter are based
- to enable students to be empathetic with the others on a cognitive level of apprehending their thoughts, beliefs and perceptions as well as on an affective level of understanding their feelings and needs
- to base teaching on a set of values and attitudes meant to serve as guideline like 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

With regard to teaching strategies, the guidelines have emphasized the need to abstain from one-size-fits-all solutions and to weigh flexibly the advantages and disadvantages that come with the various suggestions discussed so far. Specialists have thus urged us to always look at the specific needs and challenges present in every particular classroom. This mainly refers to the two questions of

- whether teachers should stay neutral or disclose their own point of view in discussions with students
- whether students should always be given the space to express themselves or at what point limits should be set.

Based on an analysis of academic debates and on insights gained during focus-group discussions with 33 history educators from 25 countries (Christophe/Tribukait 2019), these recommendations build on the above suggestions and draw attention to issues which would benefit from further reflection.

Teaching critical thinking is important, but not enough

Firstly, the concept of critical thinking emerged in history education in the 1970s and 1980s, that is in times which differ significantly from the present we are currently living in. In that period, the conflict between capitalism and socialism superimposed itself on all other issues, and the concept of critical thinking tried to meet this challenge by highlighting the need to look beyond ideology and to think independently. Since 1989 European societies have gained in heterogeneity with identities being much more fluid, social fragmentation having reached new levels and globalization drawing our attention to events as well as to mediated accounts originating in far-away places like China which nevertheless bear relevance for all of us in an increasingly interconnected world. This indicates that the concept of critical thinking needs to

be amended to be helpful for the pluralistic, globalized and increasingly polarized European societies of today.

Secondly, as soon as we focus on historical thinking not as a theoretical concept but as a concrete practice enacted in the history classroom, we realize the eminent role cultural frames and common-sense assumptions play in the process of perceiving and interpreting the past. Some studies on history education in Germany point to nationalism, Eurocentrism and racism as implicit ideas which still inform the interpretation and representation of history despite explicit commitments to equality and tolerance. An example would be a German history textbook which on the explicit level deals rather self-critical with the German colonial genocide of the Hereros and Nama in Namibia, but at the same time describes the Nama as a belligerent tribe prone to steal from others. Apparently, the sill deeply ingrained stereotypes of the wild African tribes prevent the authors from realizing that it would have been much more plausible to apply the same label to colonial invaders like the Germans who were brutally killing, looting and pilfering the resources of others in the course of the violent colonial project (Mielke 2020). Accordingly, teaching and learning history is not only guided by disciplinary models and procedures. It has to be understood as a culturally contingent practice which is to a large extent shaped by implicit assumptions and ideas which are usually not subject to conscious reflexion.

Thirdly, while the concept is well equipped to address *evidence* it does not appear to be as well prepared to tackle *relevance*. Especially in the history classroom where encounters with the past usually take place under enormous time pressure, tough decisions have to be made on which of the numerous historical facts are perceived to be so relevant that they will be emphasized and which not. As a rule, these decisions of selection cannot refer to criteria of truth claims. In a hopefully reflexive way, they have to be justified in terms of criteria of relevance. A recent study (Christophe/Ritzer forthcoming) has observed that this is often not the case as teachers tend to take decisions on relevance under the influence of powerful but largely unconsciously invoked cultural frames of interpretation. In lessons dealing with the history of the Vietnam War, some teachers would thus for instance place the war in the framework of a North-South conflict and as a result put emphasis on the confrontation between colonial France and the Viet Minh in the 1950ies whereas others who referred to the framework of the East-West conflict would rather focus on the confrontation between the USA and North Vietnam supported by the PRC and the USSR in the 1960ies and 1970ies.

Suggestion: history teaching itself should include multiple perspectives, and strive to become more transparent and reflexive.

- *Offering multiple perspectives:* Source materials should include different and opposing positions on contested issues. In order to avoid polarization on “hot” issues it can help to show a variety of viewpoints that lie between the extremes. Teachers should also discuss with students that the distinction between what is a legitimate perspective is an issue of dispute in many cases.
- *Making selections more transparent:* Teachers as well as textbook authors need to reflect on the epistemological, ethical, political and pedagogical criteria by which they choose narratives and viewpoints carefully when dealing with controversial issues: If viewpoints include, for example, false claims they might not be suitable unless students are able to check the facts; if viewpoints are disrespectful towards some groups of society students need tools to be able to deconstruct, for example, the use of language or the framing of facts and question them. There is no general rule where to draw the line between material perceived to be suitable or unsuitable since it depends on the learning goals. Because students are confronted with false claims outside school, it may be instructive to work with such material inside the classroom, however, it will need a special effort to enable students to scrutinize it.

- *Reflecting the framing of facts:* Teachers should provide examples that show that opinion is often expressed by determining which facts are deemed relevant or how facts are to be framed and categorized. Students should be made aware that every story about the past is based on emphasizing some and omitting other facts and that no version can be exhaustive.
- *Reflecting on one's own viewpoint:* Accordingly, students should occasionally be invited to reflect on why, based on which values or considerations, some facts bear more relevance to them personally or to the group they belong to than others.

Teaching values is important, but not enough

Since the post-1989 liberal democratic consensus has been challenged by populists, many European societies are divided over values. This leaves teachers with the at times challenging task to navigate between two poles when discussing controversial issues in class. While they should insist on a clear commitment to basic values of democratic societies such as human dignity, human rights, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law on behalf of all their students, they should simultaneously provide the same students with the opportunity to express opinions that are reflective of their personal and potentially diverging ethics.

Furthermore, in democratic societies where not all political parties share democratic values, where hate ideologies such as antisemitism and racism have become more visible and extremist conspiracy theories find increase support, it becomes generally more difficult to conduct debates. The challenges involved emerge from disagreement on

- how to reconcile competing values like the commitment to accept multiple perspectives and the insistence on the validity of certain truth claims
- how to translate shared values into concrete guidelines for action as in the case of mass migration or when dealing with border disputes and
- what to do when values like commitment to human rights mean that sanctions should be imposed on a regime with a record of violating these rights, while interest in economic gain suggests expanding mutually beneficial trade relations with the same regime.

Suggestions: Instead of *telling* students which values are important students should be invited to *explore* the challenges one faces when trying to make value-based decisions.

- *Discussing open issues:* In order to prepare students to navigate a complex and challenging world, students should be enabled to cope with ambiguity, to endure the contestability of answers and to nevertheless take a stance. This might be achieved by facing them with genuinely open-ended questions for discussion, dialogue and debate which escape easy answers and which arise from different types of challenging situations.
- *Weighing values and interest:* In political discussions, value-oriented and interest-oriented arguments often clash. When such issues are presented to students, they should be encouraged to explore both types of arguments. If only values are highlighted and interest-driven positions are excluded or dismissed quickly, classroom debates may seem detached from society and irrelevant to students. Instead it is desirable to conduct open discussions acknowledging that interests and values have to be weighed in every case individually. An example of a current political debate is the issue of the European Union migration policy which can be criticized in terms of human rights violations or explained as a possible means to limit immigration.

- *Perceiving ambiguity and complexity*: Students should be introduced to historical agents who defy easy categorization as either victims or perpetrators of unjust regimes. A good case in point could be those Eastern Europeans who are known for having crossed the presumably clear-cut line between supporters and opponents of the state socialist regimes. This would refer to rulers like the head of the Hungarian party Janos Kadar who had been imprisoned in Stalinist times just to orchestrate the crack-down of the uprising in 1956 as well as to some dissidents who had been party members before they violated the rules of what could be legitimately said without necessarily being aware of it.

Conclusion

Teaching history and civics has become more complicated against the backdrop of rising populism and increasing polarization in European societies. On the one hand, this trend reinforces the necessity of teaching critical thinking skills to enable students to distinguish facts from false claims in public debates. On the other hand, the new challenge presents an opportunity to reflect on and further develop current history and civics education routines. We assume that space and time for reflection could be helpful on two levels:

Firstly, teachers, curriculum designers, textbook authors and other people responsible for history and civics education are encouraged to deal with controversial issues. Given the risks that come with controversy in 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 as well as narrative frames as transparent as possible and encouraging students to critically examine the evidence as well as the relevance of arguments.

Secondly, during lessons there may also be a need to reflect on how discussions on controversial issues are developing. In cases of dissonance, simplification or confrontation, teachers and students could also gain from interrupting the usual teaching practices and taking time to reflect on the interaction on a meta-level. During these breaks, students and teachers should be encouraged to reflect on how their statements and positions are shaped on the one hand by different values and interests and on the other hand by different ways of categorizing actors, options for action and contexts. These breaks for reflection may encourage a disposition to develop empathy towards other perspectives. Making explicit what often remains implicit—and thus more powerful—shapes how we perceive the world, may help participants of classroom discussions, debates and dialogues to first understand and then to tolerate the other and thus to overcome polarization.

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About “Learning to Disagree”

The policy recommendations are based on the Erasmus+ project “Learning to Disagree” (2017-2020) funded by the European Union. The project aimed to help teachers to respond appropriately to challenges such as extreme opinions or false information brought to the classroom by students and to support them in addressing controversial or sensitive issues in history and politics lessons. It encouraged teachers to lead structured discussions enabling pupils to train social and civic competences. To this end the project partners have developed teaching materials that employ multiple perspectives to explore historic and political issues, created a teachers’ guide on discussion formats and evaluation criteria and offered workshops for teachers.

The project has been 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). The Georg Eckert Institute contributed a study on experiences, practices and approaches of history and civic teachers from 25 European countries with relation to controversial issues to the project (Christophe & Tribukait 2019).

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

Teaching materials: <https://historiana.eu/historical-content> and <https://historiana.eu/teaching-learning>