

ConCitizen

*Contested Narratives and Controversial Issues in
Citizenship Education, history and Religious Studies*

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Guide to plan a virtual exchange with focus on controversial issues and contested narratives

How do we teach controversial issues particularly related to contested narratives in post-conflict and diverse societies?

This is the research question we worked on in the ConCitizen project. Our aim was to explore possible answers to the question by engaging in transnational collaboration across educational systems and school structures. We established a shared theoretical foundation, which served as the basis for developing teaching activities.

This guide serves as a brief introduction for educators seeking to plan and implement teaching in controversial issues and contested narratives, incorporating a virtual meeting space for students from different countries.

What is the benefit of including an international virtual exchange when teaching controversial issues and contested narratives? We have identified four reasons for choosing to involve a virtual exchange in our teaching:

- The controversial issues reveal what is at stake in a specific context. What is controversial in one context might not be controversial in another setting.
- Multi-perspectivity and perspective shift is easy to demonstrate and take in use.
- Developing the students' hermeneutic awareness and acumen – students become aware of their own prejudices and preconceptions.
- Introduction to and insight into other pedagogical approaches or challenges.

The experiences from the ConCitizen project suggest that if we aim to understand each other's cultural and political contexts, sharing what is considered controversial can provide a far deeper and more complex picture of the defining characteristics of the country represented by the participants in the virtual meeting. Virtual meetings often begin with participants presenting defining traits of their own country. These presentations frequently

take on a somewhat romanticized and idyllic tone, highlighting the achievements and inventions that evoke pride. However, by sharing what is controversial within one's own context/country, participants gain a more nuanced and realistic understanding, as well as insight into the complex issues that engage the participants.

We recommend that the teacher, prior to the virtual meeting, work with or introduce the concept of a *community of disagreement*, a term introduced by the Norwegian sociologist of religion, Lars Laird Iversen. The consensus seeking classroom might not prepare the students for living in a democracy. The classroom as a community of disagreement includes multiple perspectives, critical thinking and the aim of understanding other positions. A community of disagreement is seen as a group of people with different opinions who find themselves engaged in a common process in order to gain deeper understanding and solve shared problems or challenges.

In the ConCitizen project, we have developed a shared definition of the two concepts, which you can see below:

Definitions

Contested Narratives (CN) Different collective interpretations of events, figures or texts that create conflicting perceptions and feelings about the past, present and future



Controversial issues (CI) Issues of public importance that generate conflicting views and evoke strong emotions that may result in (outward) reactions or avoidance

Project ConCitizen has elaborated two formats for virtual exchanges for classes - both have been tested with students.

Format 1 focuses on something very specific - such as a monument, a place, or an object. It is relatively straightforward for students to identify examples of such concrete topics that are entangled in controversies.

Format 2 is based on a case which could originate from the students' everyday life at school or within their local community.

Below you find the two formats unfolded.

Format 1

Share a picture of a controversial objects, place or monument

Before:

Educators' preparation: Watch the three tutorials from the Concitizen project. If time, listen to the Concitizen podcast, read a text about community of disagreement, choose exercises (for example from the power points we have posted on the Concitizen site), ice breakers and design questions you would like the students to reflect on. Prepare an introduction to the students where you unfold the intentions with the virtual exchange and the relevance for dealing with the topic. Design the tasks for the students and introduce the task prior to the virtual exchange.

Students' individual preparation: Choose one or two of the Concitizen Tutorials that the students must watch. Ask the students to select a picture of an object, artefact or monument, that they find is controversial (you can see one of the tasks formulated by the Concitizen team on the site)

Teaching at home institution (1-2 lessons): The teacher goes through the content in the two tutorials. The teacher sets the scene – and either introduces rules for the dialogue or asks the students to be co-creators of the way to have a dialogue with controversial content. The teacher can use the concepts: Safe space and brave space. Students present the pictures, objects, monuments that they have selected to peers and talk about in which way this is (maybe too) controversial. The teacher prepares the student for the virtual exchange, where the pictures must be presented to students from another institution and maybe from another country. Remember to check up on the technical issues and the roles in the breakout rooms.

During:

Students or the educators introduce the institution context: who are we and why do we meet? The teachers have planned an icebreaker in breakout rooms (It could be: *What is your name – why did you get this name and what does your name mean?*). Teachers shortly give instructions to the primary task – to share examples on controversial issues from their chosen picture. Students go into breakout rooms and share what they have prepared and work with the task the educators have given them. The virtual exchange ends with a short sum up and goodbye in the main room.

After:

Reflection in home institution either immediately after the virtual exchange is over or in the next lesson. Ask the students if they have clarifying questions – something they did not understand? What is the lesson learned? What questions do they have now? Issues the class must work with in the future?

Format 2

Case-based: Share a controversial issue from your own context

Before:

Educators' preparation: Watch the three tutorials from the Concitizen project. If time, listen to the Concitizen podcast, read a text about community of disagreement, choose exercises (for example from the power points we have posted on the Concitizen site), ice breakers and design questions you would like the students to reflect on. Prepare an introduction to the students where you unfold the intentions with the virtual exchange and the relevance for dealing with the topic. Design the tasks for the students and introduce the task prior to the virtual exchange.

Students' individual preparation: Choose one or two of the Concitizen Tutorials that the students must watch. Ask the students to describe a case where they have either witnessed or have been involved in something they would classify as controversial. The case may originate from their school or education, or perhaps from their community or a national topic that also is being discussed at home.

Teaching at home institution (1-2 lessons): The teacher goes through the content in the two tutorials. The teacher sets the scene – and either introduces rules for the dialogue or asks the students to be co-creators of the way to have a dialogue with controversial content. The teacher can use the concepts: Safe space and brave space. Students present their cases and talk about in which way this is (maybe too) controversial. The teacher prepares the students for the virtual exchange, where the cases must be presented to students from another institution and maybe from another country. Remember to check up on the technical issues and the roles in the breakout rooms.

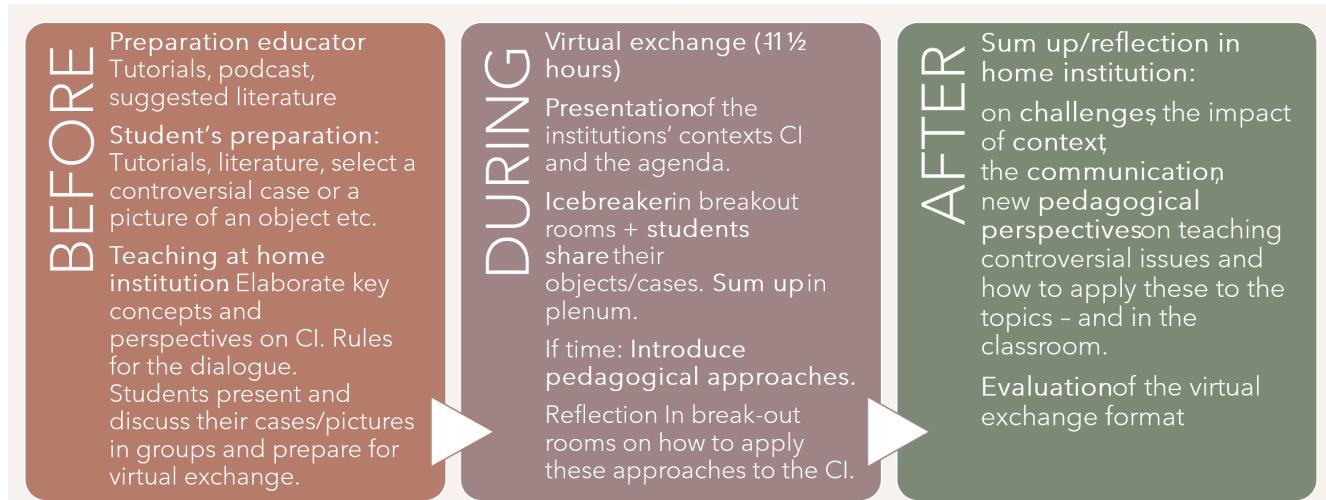
During:

Students or educators introduce the institution context: who are we and why do we meet? The teachers have planned an icebreaker exercise in breakout rooms (It could be: *What is your name – why did you get this name and what does your name mean?*). Teachers shortly give instructions on the primary task – to share cases where something controversial is at stake. Students go into breakout rooms and share what they have prepared and work with the task given by the educators. The virtual exchange ends up with a short sum up and a “goodbye” in the main room.

After:

Reflection in home institution either immediately after the virtual exchange is over or in the next lesson. Ask the students if they have clarifying questions – something they did not understand? What is the lesson learned? What questions do they have now? Issues the class must study in the future.

Here is an overview of what we recommend focusing on before, during, and after the virtual meeting.



Bank of resources:

Bekerman, Z., & Zembylas, M. (2012). *Teaching contested narratives: Identity, memory and reconciliation in peace education and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Breidlid, H. and Sigurdsson, L. (2025). *Teaching contested narratives and controversial issues. Contextualised approaches from Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Norway*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Duffy, G., & Gallagher, T. (2017). Shared Education in contested spaces: How collaborative networks improve communities and schools. *Journal of Educational Change*, 18(1), 107-134.

Helde, Mette Lindgreen (2014). *The Dialogue Handbook – the art of conducting dialogue and facilitating dialogue workshops*. DUF – Danish Center for Youth Council and Danish Centre for conflict Resolution. <https://duf.dk/materialer/produkt/the-dialogue-handbook>

Iversen, L.L. (2019) "From safe spaces to communities of disagreement". *British journal of religious education*. 41 (3), 315–326.

Kello, K. (2016). «Sensitive and Controversial Issues in the Classroom: Teaching History in a Divided Society». *I Teachers and Teaching: Theory and practice*, Vol 22, nr. 1. Tartu, Estonia: 35-53.

Richardson, N. and Gallagher, G. (2011), "Teaching controversial issues", *Education for Diversity and Mutual Understanding* Bern, Peter Lang, 251-284.

Zembylas, M. (2020). The affective atmospheres of democratic education: Pedagogical and political implications for challenging populism. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, DOI: [10.1080/01596306.2020.1858401](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1858401)

Zembylas, M. & Loukaidis, L. (2021). Affective practices, difficult histories and peace education: An analysis of teachers' affective dilemmas in ethnically divided Cyprus. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 97, 1-11.