



# PRÁTICAS

## DE-POLARISING STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS CONTROVERSIAL GENDER, RELIGIOUS, NATIONAL OR POLITICAL IDENTITIES ISSUES

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### Abstract

Addressing highly controversial topics in a way that calls into question the student's identity can be counterproductive. Indeed, if a person feels that his or her identity (gender, religious, left-right, etc.) may be threatened, it may lead the person to become entrenched in his or her convictions and not open to enriching or nuancing his or her point of view through dialogue.

The article starts by exploring theoretical contributions that examine the mechanisms through which dialogue can be made counterproductive. It then describes examples of activities that can support conversations about gender or other identity aspects, in a non-polarizing manner. Based on these activities, lessons will be identified on how to address controversial issues that affect identity in a way that it does not generate further polarization.

**Keywords:** *Dialogue; Controversial Issues; Polarisation; Gender; Identity.*

### Justification

*"In polarization we do not listen with our ears, we listen with our eyes. (...) We do not listen to what the other says, we first look at who he is, we look at which side he is from;*

*Hands and fingers, in polarization, are not hands and fingers that open, that extend, rather they are used (...) to blame someone;*

*The mouth and tongue are no longer sources of invitation, nor sources of tasting curiosity about our differences. No. They are sources of (...) demonizing the other"* (Lederach, 2019).

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In a context of increasing polarisation in almost every continent (Mc Coy et al., 2022), the rise of populisms and hate speech, efforts must be made in every sphere – reduce inequalities, promote understanding – to avoid levels that prevent a peaceful coexistence. One of the tools to depolarise is to train on citizenship or democratic education to promote the acceptance of disagreements as part of the democratic functioning, and that makes citizens responsible of getting to understand the Other.

In the framework of this monographic publication, democracy has been defined as a “set of dialogical processes that bring together people who think differently from each other and who question normativity, in order to ensure that each citizen and the wider communities (which include networks and social movements) can see their voice heard.” Debates and dialogues, indeed, seem essential strategies for democratic education. But while most educators take for granted that dialogic processes lead to a better understanding of people who think differently and clear the way for a more peaceful coexistence (García Yeste & García Carrión, 2022, Nomen, 2018), a reflection over dialogue practices argue it is not always the case, and some practices lead to better results than others (Froude & Zanchelli, 2017, analysing 105 dialogue projects over the world).

In a highly polarized setting, and/or when the students' identity and their ingroup belonging is called into question, listening and understanding “the Other” is extremely challenging. How, then, can Democratic education address polarising issues in a way that prevents further polarization and effectively promotes a better understanding?

This article shares reflections and practices issued in teacher training programs that have been implemented in Nicaragua, Spain and Italy, addressing very different polarisations.

In Nicaragua, a country which faces very high polarisation between the Government supporters and the opposition<sup>2</sup>, educational activities about depolarisation techniques, and the understanding of image of the enemy mechanisms were addressed with community leaders, nonformal educators and teachers in three occasions between 2021 and 2023. These trainings were part of a postgraduate program organised by the local organisation *Hermanamiento Zaragoza con León*, and gathered about 30 students in each of the three editions.

In Catalonia, Spain, more than twenty educational initiatives, were organized targeting more than 300 school teachers and community mediators. These started from 2017, when a pro/against independence of the Catalonia region conflict rise raised tensions between teachers, amidst harsh accusations for indoctrinating pupils. After that peak of tension, several other polarisations have been addressed, namely feminism and antifeminism, and some issues related to intercultural conflicts.

In Italy, one educational activity, lead by the Italian organisation Centro Study Sereno Regis gathered 30 youth leaders and youth educators from Italy, Spain and Ukraine to be trained on nonviolent dialogue. In that case, plenty controversial issues that worried participants were addressed, including the ongoing armed violence between Russia and Ukraine as a result of Russia's occupation.

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<sup>2</sup> See activity “superposing cleavages” for a less simplistic explanation of polarisation in Nicaragua.

In most of these trainings on how to address controversial issues through dialogue, trainees had to implement dialogical activities with their respective stakeholders in each of the three contexts.

These training and multiplying initiatives have allowed the discussion of dilemmas during the implementation and the identification of good practices that are the core of this article. As sources of information, the lesson plans of each of the trainings, the evaluation of the trainings and notes from the author on a “reflective practice note-book” have been used for this article. The practices that are described in this article are a tiny sample of those used in the different trainings described above. The overarching criteria used for the selection of these good practices corresponds to those activities that allow to address highly polarising issues through methods that polarise as little as possible.

Concretely, this article will start, in a first session, by explaining the theoretical body that warns that dialogical processes can sometimes be ineffective, or even counterproductive. The second section will describe practices that address very controversial issues, through non-polarising activities. This explanation of practices will be followed, in a final section, by some reflexions and recommendations on how to address polarising issues in a way that they really promote a peaceful coexistence.

Controversial issues are context sensitive. They can diverge from one territory to another and markedly differ over time. As identified by the Spanish teachers involved in the trainings, some controversies are strong but do not last long, while a consistent set of persistent controversial issues is related to gender and sexual orientation issues, even at early ages (generally speaking, starting from 8-9 years old) (Barbeito, 2023, p. 14 and 19). As identified by Nicaraguan educators that participated in the trainings, some controversial continual issues are the legitimisation or condemnation of the use of domestic violence, the support or opposition of the government, abortion, and, to a lesser extent, gender issues. This article will focus mainly on identity issues, such as gender, ideology and national and religious identity, and how to address them directly as a strategy to address polarizing issues in society.

### **What do we already know from academia: theoretical framework about dialogue on controversial issues**

Dialogue has often been considered an effective tool to improve democracy in the political arena (Pruitt & Thomas, 2007). In the educational sphere, too, debates and dialogues are also considered as useful strategies to practice democratic competencies and to promote peaceful coexistence (García Yeste & García Carrión, 2022; Nomen, 2018). Dialogical processes, indeed, allow to promote skills such as analysing socio-political problems, arguing, listening to and understanding diverging opinions, taking group decisions, conflict transformation and attitudes such as understanding, comprehension, etc. which are key to become active citizens.

However, a corpus of research identify that dialogue does not always have the desired effect, and can be, in fact, counterproductive (Brandsma, 2020 p-70-85; Pruitt & Thomas, 2007, p. 71-72). In the field of social psychology, Pierre Moscovici and Marisa Zavalonni identified in 1969, the “group polarization effect”, which implies that when people are in a group, they tend to defend more extreme positions than what they would have

argued individually (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). In that sense, dialogue would not necessarily lead to a shift of opinions that would get people closer.

From the neuroscience point of view, Stephen Porges' of Polyvagal Theory has described the physical consequences, that makes people react differently if they perceive threat (Porges, 2019). Under the perception of threat, something that can happen in polarized contexts, individuals' nervous system loses its capacity to be socially engaged with others: the feeling of unsafety makes it difficult for them to listen to the other person. Getting his feeling of security back would require that the counterpart would have reassuring voice tone, facial expression, smile or other reassuring expressions that would deactivate that feeling of threat. Without a feeling of safety and trust, the incapacity to listen sabotage the potential of dialogue. These psychological theories which caution against the assumption that dialogue promotes understanding. So, which are the proper conditions to facilitate dialogue on polarizing issues to actually promote peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding?

## Purposes of dialogue

While in the first section "democracy" has been related to processes of dialogue, "dialogue" needs to be defined as well, and also, for practical reasons, which are its objectives. The purpose of dialogue for democratic education ranges significantly depending on the discipline of focus.

In the educational field, authors such as Freire, Habermas, Vygotsky, Bruner, Wells, Flecha, see dialogue as a gate to learn, thanks to the interaction with others (García Yeste & García Carrión, 2022). With a lens of promoting peaceful coexistence, some approaches in peace studies consider dialogue is a process that can contribute to clarify the underlying values under our own opinions and positions as well as opinions and positions of people we disagree with (Patfoort, 2011, Soliya, 2016) it can also open our own horizons with new insights in a way it can transform relationships with people who think differently (Nansen Fredssenter, 2020); (Lederach, 1996, p. 6). When dialogue is linked to a democratic or peacebuilding process, indeed, it is expected that dialogue lead to some kind of consensus, or at least some concrete outcomes and (Kratzer, 2019) to transfer changes on each participant respective community (Froude & Zanchelli, 2017).

Purpose of dialogue	Strategies
Learning (Freire, Habermas, Vygotsky, Bruner, Wells, Flecha)	Arguing, listening to the Other. Reflecting on what has been learned.
Clarifying values (Patfoort, Soliya)	Asking for the foundations (values, experiences, needs) that make people think what they think.
Transforming relationships (Nansen Fredssenter, Lederach)	Listening, identifying similarities and discrepancies, understanding the other's point of view, empathy. Identifying the changes of point of view. Promoting positive interdependence or cooperation between "sides".
Reaching consensus over an agenda of change (Kratzer)	Prioritising common needs by consensus. Defining a roadmap for change.
Changing respective communities (Froude & Zanchelli)	Defining by consensus a roadmap for change based on common needs. Implementing and monitoring changes on the ground.

Table 1. *Dialogue: purposes and strategies.*

Source: own. (more than one purpose and strategy can be put into practice at the same time).

Depending on the objective, then, dialogical processes can use very different strategies (see table 1). As opposed to debate, which often implies a will to convince the interlocutor, or make him change his or her mind, dialogue is more open, and should accept almost<sup>3</sup> any point of view (Nansen Fredssenter, 2020, p. 15; Barbeito & Caireta, 2019, p. 8-9;).

### **Content: can we dialogue about everything?**

Although many approaches to dialogue agree that its purpose is not to convince anyone and that there should not be an agenda behind what is correct or incorrect to believe, there can also be some limits if dialogues are set to promote a better understanding of people who do not think alike.

In a context of increasingly polarised societies where discourses get more and more extreme, and at the same time in education settings supposed to educate in values such as respect, cooperation and understanding (UNESCO, 2023), teachers are confronted with the Popper paradox: Do we need to be tolerant with intolerance? Or, framed more concretely, how should we proceed in a dialogue, if statements are made that can sabotage the relationships within the group? Even if the objective of dialogue does not have an agenda detailing what students or participants need to think, there are red lines that need to be set<sup>4</sup>, such as with hate speech.

#### **Box 1. Nonjudgmental red lines**

In a residential training in Italy including Italian, Spanish and Ukrainian youth being trained to become facilitators of “Nonviolent debates”, an initial activity was dedicated to define jointly the ground rules for the development of the training. One of the rules agreed on was that the language used would be nonviolent and respectful for other people. Participants spent a part of the training practicing nonjudgemental strategies to listen to the other person, by trying to identify the values, experiences and needs of the other.

But at the same time, three times over the training, Ukrainian participants – who had escaped from armed violence in their country, and more precisely in their region, Sumy, for one week and were obviously emotionally affected, – stated sentences such as “I wish all Russians were dead”. Some non-Ukrainian participants felt confronted and complained that such statements were contradicting the ground rules. Ukrainian participants, on their side, felt judged and considered participants were not empathetic enough with the situations they are facing.

Opening a discussion in plenary where some participants would have to justify why they wished other people would be dead was ruled out in that occasion (but ground rules were reminded in a nonjudgemental way, and some spaces for dialogue between participants out of the plenary did also take place).

<sup>3</sup> See below in this article reflections on the Popper’s Paradox.

<sup>4</sup> Setting red lines means educators should not be indifferent to any statement. But it does not necessarily mean that it should be blamed or stopped in a forceful way in front of the group. Finding the good balance between setting limits, but at the same time to be open to discussion to be able to transform those thoughts is challenging but possible.

In that sense, whereas every issue should be addressed, some subjects require more maturity, group trust, appreciation, definition of ground rules and contextual drivers that determine whether there are favourable conditions to address a controversial issue or not.

### Asking the right question

For highly polarising issues, the Deutch depolarisation specialist Bart Brandsma recommends, as one of the four “game changers” he identifies, to “change the issue” in order to make sure the question does not promote the split of the group, but instead focusses on common needs or experiences (Brandsma, 2020, p. 84).

#### **Box 2. Framing a non-polarising question**

In the context of an independentist rise in 2017-2018 in Catalonia, Spain, some teachers (mostly independentist) were open to discuss the pro-independence rise with their students, arguing it was better to discuss it than to make it a taboo issue, while other teachers (mostly non-independentist) considered the topic was too politicized to be addressed in the classroom. So asking teachers in professional development sessions about their opinion on debating Catalanian independence in the classroom was a highly polarizing question. For this reason, after an online consultation with Bart Brandsma, a question that was discussed with teachers was rather “how can we, as teachers, continue teaching and promoting peaceful coexistence at school despite the external polarizing context?”, focusing on common needs of every teacher.

Apart from departing from common or diverging needs, the question to be discussed has also different results if requires yes/no closed answers than if they are open questions. A debate activity at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, in Spain, asking students “does feminism polarises?” resulted in a vivid thought-provoking exchange of views between university students used to discuss. In a different context, a much less polarising question should have been asked.

### Degree of confrontation

Experience and research coincide that dialogues must take place in a political context and timeframe when there is a low degree of violence or tension, and a sufficient trust between participants. Although some experiences of dialogue have existed in the most confrontational scenarios amid open violence (i.e. Northern Ireland, Israel-Palestine, Colombia, etc.) dialogues are more effective in moments of conflict de-escalation (Brandsma, 2020, p. 50-63; Salomon, 2006). Similarly, in educational settings, if a subject to be discussed is very controversial and participants might have overly strong emotions regarding it, it might also be too early to address it in a way that ensures people can listen to each other with openness. Soliya’s approach recommends the promotion of an “uncomfortable but safe” space, where people can get out of their comfort zone with safety (Soliya, 2016). So when it comes to dialogue not anytime is the suitable moment, according to the context and to the group preparedness. As for the context, it is important to wait until the sociopolitical context is more favourable. About group preparedness, trust among the group is a crucial matter. Sincere listening and

understanding requires safety and trust. Indeed, trust within the group as an essential pre-requisite for addressing controversial issues (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2021; Barbeito & Caireta, 2019) in polarised contexts. For these reasons, some authors emphasize the need to carefully prepare the scene for a favourable context, by making participants aware of the expected competencies to be used in a dialogue (i.e. listening, empathy, flexibility in one's points of view, self-criticism, etc.) to promote provention among members of the group (and particularly trust and appreciation), and agree on rules (Barbeito & Caireta, 2019, p. 25-29). "Provention" (Cascón, 2001; Burton, 1990) is a group-building process to provide people with the competences to address conflict and dialogue in a safe climate, throughout activities to promote presentation; knowledge of the other; appreciation; confidence; communication (including active listening) and cooperation. Provention group building processes are often coupled with deciding group ground rules.

Once a reasonably safe space has been created through provention and ground rules, content activities regarding controversial issues can be addressed. Until these conditions have not been ensured within the group, it might not be a proper moment to dialogue.

### **With whom: those who want to dialogue or those who do not?**

If dialogue needs to take place at the right time, it also needs to happen with the right people. Talking only among people who are already convinced about the need for dialogue is not as useful as it can be. But dialogue among people who are stuck in monologues (Brandsma, 2020, p. 39-41) also do not transform that much. To make sure a dialogical space is fruitful there is a challenging pre-requisite: conforming a group to the correct balance between people open to dialogue and those who are not.

In schools, groups are already formed so teachers cannot choose the quantity of people who might hold extreme views. In this case, though the teacher can and should – control the balance of flexible and non-flexible interventions through facilitation: making sure that the conversation is not overtaken by the few more polarized intervenors, but that any opinion including the "less passionate" is heard. Through the choice of methodology the facilitator can choose methods that regulate turn-taking (rounds, Phillips 66, etc.).

If fake news or conspiracy theories are involved in a contested subject, some authors recommend following different strategies according to the distinct profile of the debaters. As recommended by Farinelli, (2021, p. 19), highly educated people's beliefs can be addressed by arguing upon facts, inviting to access fact-checkers, ridiculing the source of the fake information or using logic-based arguments. Individuals that have a higher tendency to believe conspiracy theories need to be addressed through different strategies, such as avoiding ridiculing their arguments, and instead using arguments or messages used by trusted messengers (i.e. former extremists), showing empathy to their beliefs, and recognising their capacity of critical thinking. In this sense, it is relevant to identify if there are people directly affected in the classroom to choose a tone that will be adequate for the correct development of the exercise without anyone feeling attacked or too personally involved.



### Box 3. When students are personally affected

A school in Barcelona (Spain) was planning to offer three training sessions about sexual education (sex and gender, sex and consent and pornography) with external trainers. Some students of different religious background said they did not want to participate in the sessions arguing that, from previous experiences on similar subjects, they felt that the contents were contradicting their own values and religion, and that trainers were not open to dialogue when they expressed their disagreement in some issues. Acknowledging the discomfort, the responsible teacher said that this content was included in the official curriculum, so that there was no way that students could skip those classes. The discussion escalated, leading to an increasing discomfort among dissenting students. Some of them skipped the classes and some attended reluctantly.

While affective and sexual education is included in the Spanish currículum and can therefore be addressed at school, the incident is an indicator that the methodology and the tone must really take into account the diversity in the classroom, making sure students can listen to those contents without feeling it contradicts completely their identity or values, by choosing carefully their words and the radicality of the statements, to be able to reach also those that are reluctant, not only the convinced ones (see also the activity “Identity trash bin” below).

### Methodology

The choice of methodology and activity is probably the most essential decision to ensure that the activity is not reinforcing divisions.

Robert Stradling, Michael Noctor and Bridget Baines, specialised in how to address controversial issues, identified four strategies to apply when an issue is too controversial: These strategies are “distancing” (taking distance of a highly polarising issue by using analogies with examples from another country, historical period, etc. sometimes through story books, drama plays, etc.); “compensating” (introducing ideas that balance the statements of students when those are too positioned); “empathizing” (using activities which make participants step in the other one’s shoe), and “exploring” (inviting participants to research by themselves, in order to get more complex responses) (Stradling, Noctor & Baines quoted in Papamichael et al., 2015). These are useful methodological tips to regulate to polarising subjects.

To help using methodology as a tool to counterbalance the degree of polarization in a group, Marina Caireta and Cécile Barbeito have classified debate and dialogue methodologies and activities according to their “safety”:

	<b>POLARISING STRATEGIES</b> To get out of the comfort zone	<b>DEPOLARISING STRATEGIES</b> To promote safety
<b>Dialogical Methodologies</b>	Controversial issues Process work, co-resolve	Philosophy for children Non-Violent Communication Restaurative practices
<b>Example of debate or dialogue Activities</b>	Barometer of values Conscience alley Four Corners	Silent debate I-message Socratic circle

Table 2. *Polarising and depolarising methodologies and activities.*  
Source: Based on Barbeito & Caireta, 2019, p. 38-44.



However, debates or dialogues may simply not be the most adequate strategy. Although any intervention should require communication exchanges, sometimes the starter activity can be a group dynamic, arts activity, etc., that then lead to a discussion.

The following section exemplifies other activities than debates or dialogues.

### Examples of controversial issues addressed in a non-polarised way

This section displays examples of activities undertaken in highly polarised contexts (such as Nicaragua), or about controversial issues (in Spain and Italy). Those examples refer to depolarising strategies (see righthand column in Table 1), some of them addressing highly polarising issues such as gender and/or ethnicity-religion, some others discussing about the effect of polarisation itself.

### Examples of activities addressing controversial issues about gender, ethnicity, religion and/or national identity

When gender is a polarising issue, it might be necessary to address it, not as a debate question (either closed or open), but as an activity which is not intellectual, but that departs from the own experience. The present section shows two examples on how to address polarizing issues such as gender or political ideology (in a polarized context) in a way it helps people to connect with each other:

#### **Box 4. Activity: “Gender mandates”**

To reflect on how people live under an imposed pattern determined by dominant gender roles, participants of different genders are asked to share two experiences: one in which they felt proud to be men or women and one in which they felt they failed to fulfil that male or female role. After a round of sharing those experiences in a plenary circle, a dialogue is promoted about the way in which participants have internalised or resisted gender mandates. The recognition of these “negative” experiences allow learning from them and transgressing to tight gender mandates.

For the debriefing, participants are then asked to discuss which experiences that have been mentioned in the exercise surprised them the most, and what things they consider the worst part of being of the opposite sex. Then participants are asked to find real data about that issues they have identified about the other sex. Source: Kevin Xabier Obregón, participant and facilitator of awareness raising activities from Nicaragua.

By sharing very personal experiences, the activities allow to discuss a highly polarising issue such as gender mandates without blaming anyone.

In a similar exercise, another activity invites to depart from<sup>5</sup> common personal experiences to empathise with “the Other”, to acknowledge that extremely polarized positions have negative effects for everyone.

### Box 5. Activity “Sticking polarisation”

In order to show that highly polarising issues (regarding political ideology in the case of this example) have had an impact on everyone, participants are invited to rate the extent to which polarization has affected them in several aspects such as their relationships with friends, family, neighbours, at church, in their leisure time, at work, in their city, in their country... In each case they have to rate with a sticker if polarization affected them almost nothing (green sticker), a little bit (yellow sticker, or a lot (red sticker). Once completed, participants compare and discuss the results of the activity.



The exercise, practiced in Managua, Nicaragua in May 2023, shows how family was a surrounding where quite a lot of bad experiences took place in relation to ideological polarisation in the country, whereas among friends this was not so much the case (Picture by Cécile Barbeito).

In a second part of the exercise, participants sit in a circle and choose one occasion they want to share with the group where polarisation of opposed political ideas has affected their life in a situation that involved strong emotions (affective polarisation). This second part does not need a debriefing, but participants can be invited to do a second round of comments if they feel like respectfully reacting to what other colleagues explained, highlighting similarities, etc.

Source - Inspired by Coleman, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> In some contexts, it can make sense to start with this activity, to make people connect firstly with common experiences, and then move to think at a more cognitive level (i.e. with the exercise about cleavages). Sometimes sharing experiences of the harm due to polarisation can be so sensitive that it is better to start with a less positioning activity (then it would be preferable to start with the cleavages analysis, and then move to the emotional one). Every context can have a different reality, so it is highly recommended to check the adequacy of the order of the activities with other local people.

In both cases, activities depart from connecting with and sharing the own experience with Others, while at the same time, listening to the Other's experiences, regardless the issue that is dividing people.

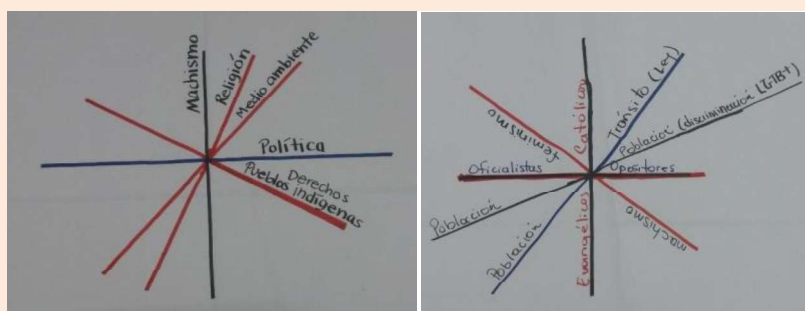
### Activity examples to understand how different polarisations affects us

Polarisation can affect us in different manners. Understanding how polarisation works and applies to different issues is also a way to develop awareness of our own behaviour in such situations.

As for polarisation, authors as Miller (2020, p. 56-57), Almagro Holgado (2019, p. 41) and many others distinguish ideological polarisation (when ideas get increasingly extreme) from affective polarisation (when emotions are involved in polarisation, and it becomes more and more unlikely to have friends, love relationships etc. with people from “the other side”).

#### Box 6. Activity “Superposing cleavages”

With the objective of making society's cleavages visible, participants are split into groups of 4-5 heterogeneous individuals. They are asked to identify the main issues that divide society into two.



In these exercises, undertaken in Managua in May 2023, participants identified issues such as politics, male chauvinism, religion, the environment and rights for indigenous peoples (picture on the left), or also politics (pro-government “officialists”/oppositors), religion (Catholics/ Evangelists), sex-gender (male chauvinists/feminists), etc. (Pictures by Cécile Barbeito).

Debriefing should lead to the reflection that having several cleavages in a society – when they do not overlap – is better than having overlapping cleavages that conform only two big groups.

Participants can then be invited to think where they would place themselves, and what do they have in common with people they believe are different. In a highly polarized context, though, it is better not to make participants share where do they stand, and to keep that information unexplicit to preserve participants from having to take sides.

Source - own.

### **Box 7. Activity “Identity trash bin”**

The purpose of this activity is to experience how important it is to respect the core elements of people's identity. For this exercise, participants sitting in a circle take four pieces of paper and write on them four aspects of their own identity which are most relevant for them (i.e. a religion (i.e. “evangelical”); a gender or sexual orientation; an age; a family condition (i.e. “mum” or “grand-dad”); ideology; football supporter; or whatever aspect that they think defines themselves. One identity aspect per paper (it is important to say they will not be obliged to share what is written on their papers, so they can feel safe to write whatever is more important to them, regardless of it being socially accepted or not. They will be able to share only if they feel like.

Once they have their four papers, a trash bin is placed in the centre of the circle. Participants need to select one of those identity descriptors and throw it away in the trash bin. Once everyone is finished, participants are asked to do the same with a second piece of paper, and a third round. Meanwhile, the facilitator must be very attentive to all the expressions of discomfort and complains, to help the aftermath discussion.

In the debriefing, questions invite participants to discuss about how easy or difficult it has been to get rid of those identity descriptors and why. For some people the exercise can be easy, but for others it can be really painful. It is important to leave a space for those for whom it has been difficult, to relate the discussion with the importance for people to express their own identity in their own terms, without external judgements. Relate then this to some examples: do we allow, as society, cultural minorities to express their identity fully, or what kind of judgements and/or limitations do they have? Do we allow all gender identities (including straight CIS males) to express their identity without judgements? What shall we do when some social values seem to crash between them?

Source - unknown. Activity used both in Nicaragua and Spain.

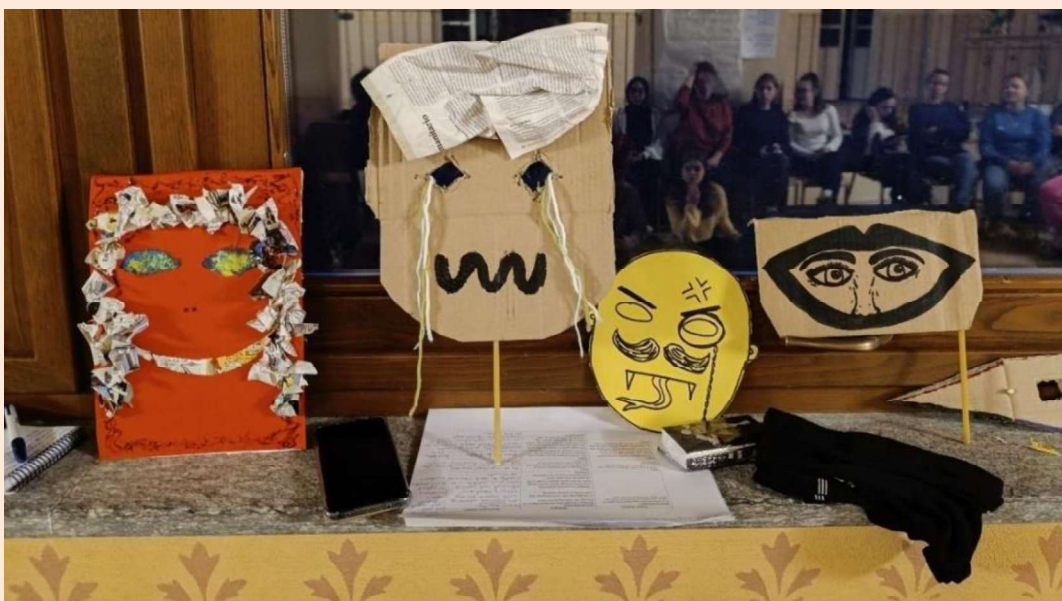
In order to have conciliatory conversations, and – as educators – in order to facilitate nonjudgemental conversations that can promote a change of perception in the other (as well as in ourselves), it is useful to be self-aware of which issues or values are non-negotiable to ourselves.

Some aspects of our identity are often non-negotiable back-bone elements of ourselves. Threatening or questioning those will probably not allow further conversations.

### Box 8. Activity “Un masking red lines”

This is a fine arts activity aimed at making participants more aware of their own values and red lines, and how do they react when those values are questioned. For this, participants must draw a mask. In one side, they have to write the values/issues that are more important for them, and are non-negotiable. In the other side of the mask, participants must show how do they react when, in a conversation, this issue is addressed in a way that it contradicts our own values. Masks must represent how this situation make them feel.

Masks representing how we feel when an issue which is very dear to us is being heavily questioned.



Picture by Cécile Barbeito in an exchange among Italian, Catalan-Spanish and Ukrainian participants about “Nonviolent Debate”.

The elaborated masks can be then displayed to open up the discussion about what values are non-negotiable to us (not forcing anyone to talk), and how do we usually react to those situations (shutting up, blaming the other, empathetic listening) and how we could improve our reactions to have more effective conversations.

Source - Activity adapted from a Sereno Regis training Course in Italy.

## Conclusions

So far, we have shared examples of activities that allow very polarizing issues to be addressed through strategies that do not increase that polarization. Both from the contributions collected in the theoretical framework, and from the comparison of the activities described (see table 3), a set of criteria can be deduced to help develop activities that address polarizing issues effectively and contribute to the rapprochement between people.

Some of these criteria are:

- Existence of a climate of trust that favours empathetic listening to the other, a willingness to understand the person who expresses herself (because the fact of feeling listened to is healing), and in which the people who share their experience do not feel judged. This precondition is important not only so that during the activity people feel comfortable to generously share their personal stories and exercise gives good results, but also because as Porges (2019) points out from neuroscience they are conditions for people to move from fear or suspicion to states of greater security and confidence. Given that this climate of prior trust is so important, it should not be left to spontaneity, but rather have been favoured with previous activities with this objective of prevention (Cascón, 2001).
- Uses non-polarizing methodologies and activities so as not to deepen the divisions (Barbeito & Caireta, 2019), avoiding dichotomous questions, and instead focusing on topics that highlight common needs (Brandsma, 2020).
- Starts from (common) experiences: does not focus on cognitive activities (argumentation, data), but on sharing one's own experience. Activities often start by identifying how the addressed subject affected participants (self-empathy) and then how it affected others (empathy).
- Focuses on trying to understand, rather than blame, the Other and on the values that are behind what they are affirming.

We hope that this article will provide some clues on how to plan activities on controversial topics that polarize groups, and thus encourage teachers and other educators to foster dialogues that allow for greater mutual understanding.



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