



Social safety

Discussing controversial and emotional topics in class or in your team

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Table of contents

Try not to avoid difficult topics	3
Imbalance	3
It's important to keep talking.....	3
Reflective dialogue	3
Differences between dialogue and debate	3
Practical points of attention for teams	4
Moments of tension	5
Points of attention for in class.....	5
Justification	6
Sources.....	6





Try not to avoid difficult topics

Discussing controversial topics isn't easy. It doesn't take much to arrive at topics that are ethically or socially sensitive (such as the coronavirus, abortion, gender, drugs, euthanasia, religion, refugees, the reputation of politics, or terrorism). These kind of discussions harbour the risk of polarisation, he-said-she-said, increasing prejudice and frustration. Ideas and opinions may be miles apart or diametrically opposed. Even then, we still want to keep the dialogue going, whether with students in class or with colleagues within your team. This document provides you with a number of tips to go about this the right way.

Imbalance

A topic that is controversial is one that is characterised by conflicting interests and values, with strong disagreement about statements or actions. Controversial topics have the power to cause fundamental divisions in society and bring about strong emotions and protests. They may be about a situation that has occurred, the causes of that situation, the right way to respond to it or its possible effects. Controversial topics are complex and demand much of our knowledge and self-awareness. They also require balance, the need to show both personal involvement as well as objectivity, and the formation of an opinion without pressure or indoctrination.

It's important to keep talking

Engaging in dialogue about ethically or socially sensitive topics and keeping that dialogue going is important for a variety of reasons. Here are some of them:

1. At Inholland, students get ready to play an active role in society with respect for human rights and the constitution. We prepare students for a role as citizens in a **pluralistic society** by introducing them to democratic processes and respectful ways to deal with differences of opinion.
2. By keeping the dialogue going, you develop and stimulate your critical thinking skills.
3. You also strengthen your interpersonal skills: you develop important behavioural and communication skills, such as listening carefully, answering firmly, speaking with conviction, working well with others and tolerance towards different points of view.
4. It allows you to discuss current events, particularly when these are closely related to the experiences of your students.
5. It allows you to ensure a pleasant atmosphere in the group and at Inholland generally. Among other things, Inholland also teaches you the proper way to discuss the hard things in life together.

Reflective dialogue

A discussion about a controversial topic can be defined as a 'reflective dialogue' between students or colleagues, or between students and lecturers, about a topic that has engendered differences of opinion. The discussion may be prompted by an incident, a question or a statement by a student or lecturer. The ensuing dialogue can be used to gather evidence and comments and to express the varying points of view. The aim of a 'reflective dialogue' is to promote the notion of listening to and responding to the ideas of those who believe differently.

Differences between dialogue and debate

Discussions about ethically or socially sensitive topics sometimes devolve into debates, often unintentionally. If we want to bring the parties closer, a dialogue is preferable to a debate.

Dialogue		Debate
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What really matters?	Key question	Which opinion wins out? Which ones don't?
Principles, values and standards	Theme of the conversation	Points of view and arguments
What carries the greatest weight? Hierarchy of principles, values and standards	Result	What is the nature of the problem? Separation of major and minor issues Elimination of specious arguments Decision
Understand	Participants strive to	Convince
Flights of rhetorical fancy or high-minded talk	Risks	Being right is less important than being seen to be right, false consensus

Practical points of attention for teams

Some events that cast a long shadow can be prepared for as a team. In such cases, it's useful to discuss the following points:

1. Set aside time and space to discuss the topic and/or the conflict situation within the team, in class or at Inholland generally.
2. Determine Inholland's policy (nature and substance of the response) beforehand.¹
3. Make sure you're well prepared. Gather background information and find out how students or colleagues feel about the situation that prompted the discussion and its cause(s) before you begin. Pay attention to multicultural aspects, religious beliefs and the social backgrounds of students and colleagues.
4. First, clarify as a team what you'll be discussing, what the potential dilemmas are and which method(s) and format(s) you'll use during the discussion. Be conscious of your own prejudices and be open about them.
5. Ask lecturers and team(s) for support, help each other and exchange experiences if required. Organise one or several opportunities for colleagues to 'let off steam'.
6. A tried and tested discussion method is the LSD method: listen, summarise, dig deeper. This will allow you to guide the discussion and let students 'think' in a professional manner.
7. The first point of order in your class and/or teaching method should be to pay attention to the personal feelings of students or colleagues.
8. Don't raise the bar too high. It's not realistic to expect to change each other's minds. The point is to exchange beliefs and opinions and to find out more about them.

¹ Inholland's articles of association include the following statement:

'The basis of the Foundation is non-denominational, with recognition and acceptance of and mutual respect for the various denominations at the various locations of the institutions maintained by the Foundation. The Foundation respects the diversity of values held by a multiform society.'

The integrity code includes the following statement:

'As a point of departure, all human beings are created equal. The atmosphere at Inholland University of Applied Sciences enables open and respectful communication while respecting each other's philosophical or religious beliefs. We denounce any kind of unequal treatment of students and staff without objective and reasonable justification.'





Moments of tension

A discussion about a social or critical event may originate spontaneously in a class or group and lead to moments of tension. The challenge is to use these moments and turn them into learning opportunities.

- What is your own point of view as a lecturer and supervisor? Know yourself, know what moves you and think about how to deal with this in your role as process supervisor.
- Be firm and keep the conversation structured.
- Don't take attacks personally (these are usually attacks on your role as lecturer/team leader rather than attacks on you as a person).

Points of attention for in class

Below are a few practical tips to deal with moments of tension in class or within the team.

- Don't present opinions as facts.
- Allow the group to present multiple points of view.
- Present yourself as a lecturer, not an all-knowing authority. Formulate carefully when putting forward your own points of view and keep the Inholland principles in mind. We want to be an inclusive university of applied sciences where everyone feels welcome.
- Listen carefully.
- Ask for clarification.
- Correct factual inaccuracies during discussions.
- Monitor substance and behaviour and don't be tempted to attack individuals or groups.
- Try to muster respect for each other's opinions, even if they are minority views. Teach the participants to appreciate differences.
- Avoid us-and-them situations – encourage broad dialogue, tolerance and understanding.
- Ask critical questions in case a consensus is reached too quickly. Ask questions aimed at finding nuance.
- Determine and monitor the parameters of the discussion. Racist utterances, intentional slights, and incitements to hatred, violence or discrimination must not be tolerated. This also goes for intimidation of others on the basis of their gender, sexual preference, nationality or religious beliefs. Speak out when someone oversteps the mark.
- Differentiate between what students and colleagues are saying to each other and what they really mean. Listen to each other's concerns. A 'crude' remark may hide a deeper concern. Try to get it on the table.
- Try to make students and colleagues understand that primary reactions are often counterproductive: fighting fire with fire leads to escalation, doubt isn't a sign of weakness, hate consumes both yourself and other people, and you can get carried away by other people's emotions.
- Avoid verbal altercations right from the start. If someone (such as a student) is being excessively loud, focus on the substance.
- Teach the participants to assess information critically by comparing multiple sources and tracing the backgrounds of international conflicts.
- It's important for Inholland employees to give space to all points of view.
- Stress that conflicts/controversies are opportunities for growth.
- Take care to part ways on good terms. Verify this by asking questions like:
 - Has everyone had an opportunity to share his/her story?
 - Does anyone feel hurt or passed over?
 - Was this a fruitful dialogue?
- Share the outcomes of the discussions in class with other team members and discuss follow-up if necessary.





Justification

This document is an edited version of the ROC TOP publication *Controversiële en emotionele onderwerpen in de klas* (Controversial and emotional topics in class), produced for Inholland University of Applied Sciences with the approval of the author.

Sources

- Kees van Eerten (2015), *Controversiële en emotionele onderwerpen in de klas*. ROC TOP, Amsterdam.
- Inholland University of Applied Sciences, *Articles of Association*:
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