



University of Applied
Sciences and Arts

Assessment practices

when teaching about controversial topics



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Structure

1. **Assessment of lessons with controversial topics**
2. **Examples of assessments**
3. **Conclusion**



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1

Assessment of lessons with controversial topics

Challenges assessment

- Ensure not to impose specific ideologies on learners or mimick teacher's values
- Weary of alienating students *as 'failed citizens'* (Keating, Kerr, Benton, Lopes & Featherstone, 2009)
- Lack of student perspective: “*Assessment is done to us not with them*” (Jessop, 2023)

! But contributes to developing competences (Griffin & Care, 2014; Martin, 2019)



Assessment on controversial issues

*Teachers should provide non-evaluative, specific, and meaningful feedback to students on their contributions [about controversial issues], encourage **academic risk-taking**, and **frame failure as a means of learning** (Reznitskaya, 2012; Schweinle et al., 2008).*



Assessment is always contextual

- Depending on teacher role
- Depending on the subject
- Depending on the school-level policy
(for example % weighting for attitudes/values)

“

“Based on history, I would focus on “Do you use different sources? Are you critical enough of those sources? Do you interpret them correctly?”

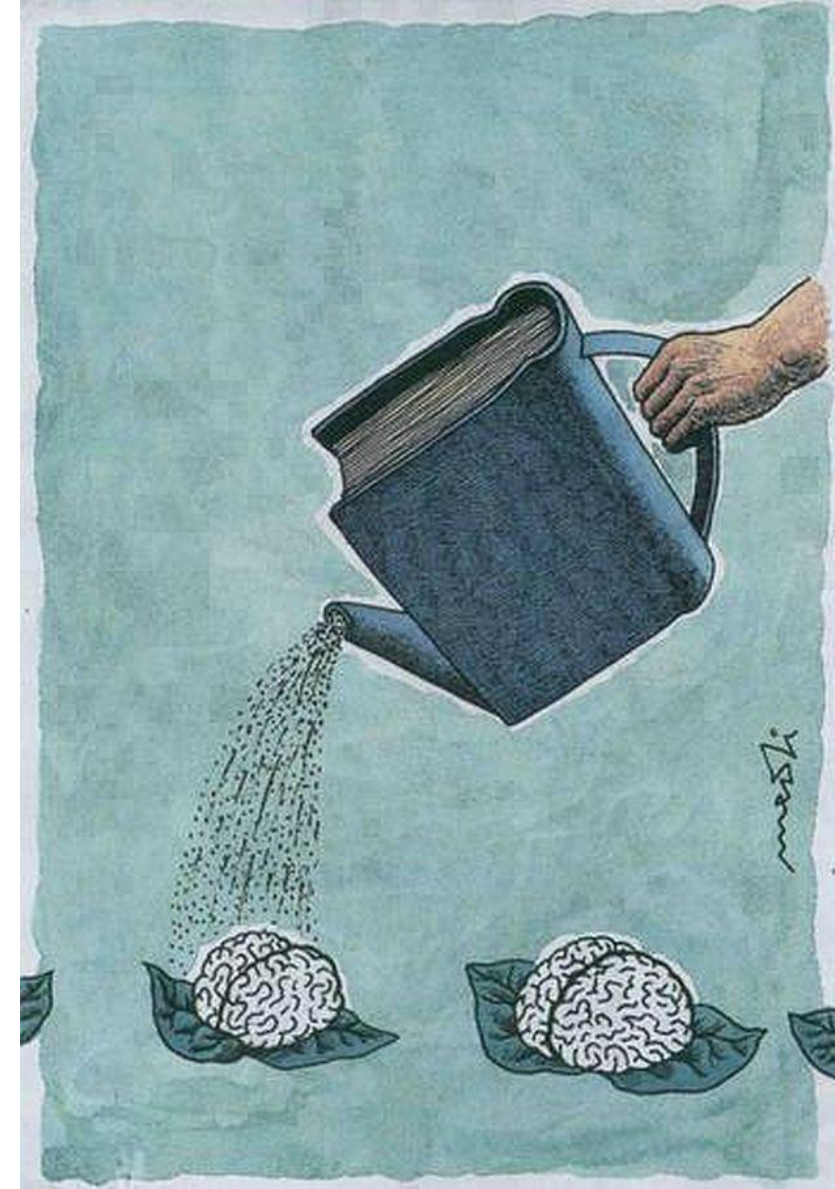
“Stating clearly this lesson is an opinion lesson. I am never going to tell you that this is right or wrong. You have to be able to justify it, but you have learned about it.”

“We call it Personal and Interpersonal Development—it has 20% of the grade. Therefore, I obviously use that. But it is not so formal”

Sometimes depending on the didactical method

Example general assessment on critical thinking

- **Critical Thinking Scoring Rubric** designed by SPC (St. Petersburg College)
 - A - Exemplary B - Proficient; C - Developing; D - Emerging; F - Not Present
- 1) Communication (Define the problem in your own words)
 - 2) Analysis (Compare & contrast the available solutions)
 - 3) Problem Solving (Select & defend your final solution)
 - 4) Evaluation (Identify weaknesses in your final solution)
 - 5) Synthesis (Suggest ways to improve/strengthen your final solution)
 - 6) Reflection (Reflect on your own thought process)

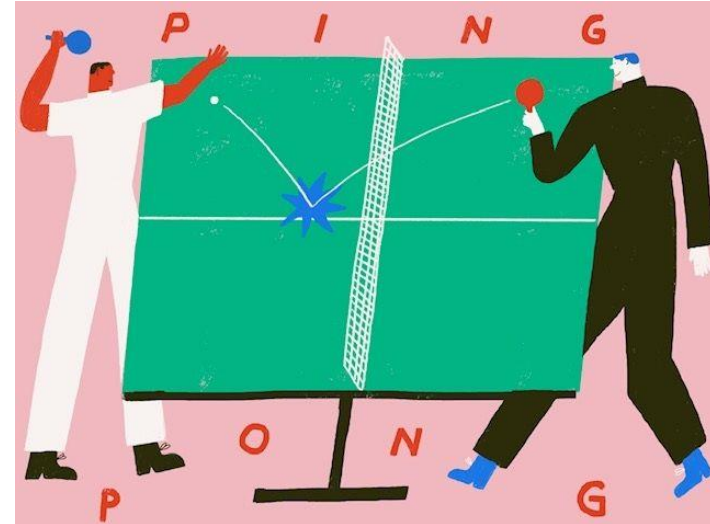


Focus of assessment for debates

Debate (Malloy, 2020)

- Reasoning and evidence
- Listening and response (refutation)
- Organisation and prioritisation
- Expression and delivery
- Team work and roles

<https://www.debatingforeveryone.com/resources/how-debating-works/how-to-judge-a-debate>



Focus of assessment for philosophical dialogue

Philosophical Richness Indicators

- . Justifications or examples supporting opinions are expressed and evaluations are reflected upon.
- . Diverse and substantial thoughts are expressed.

Co-construction Indicators

- . Statements refer to previous statements by repeating, rephrasing, supplementing or differentiating them.
- . Unclear statements are taken up and clarified by (follow-up) questions.

Focus Indicators

- . Questions and statements contribute to answering the underlying question. The conversation does not digress in content.
- . The underlying philosophical question is explicitly taken up again during or at the end of the dialogue.

(Bernhard, Wilhelm & Helbling, 2024)



How do you assess?

- Rubrics
- Portfolios
- Peer- and self-assessment
- Observation grids
- Knowledge tests
- Oral & written assessment (focus on reflection)
- Creative output (artistic interpretations of social issues)
- ...

Assessing what ?

- Participation
- Ability to question different points of view
- Locate concepts in time and space
- Argumentation
- Theoretical foundations of the topic
- Respect for others' opinions and tolerance
- Fluency and structure in communication
- Knowledge on democratic concepts
- ...

Assessment through soup

13/01/2026

- Formative assessment is when the chef tastes the soup
- Summative assessment is when only the customers taste the soup



Formative and summative assessment

Summative assessments

- Focuses primarily on knowledge (Veugelers & de Groot, 2019)
- Engagement and participation
- *Importance of some summative assessment:* Students don't take the assessment seriously if it is not graded

Mostly formative assessment

- Skills and attitudes
- Teachers emphasize assessing how students arrive at their opinions, not what those opinions are

"I'm more in favor of evaluating; not so much of the opinion itself, but how that opinion came about. What you can disapprove of is how that opinion is formed, on the basis of what information you have looked up, what ways of reasoning"

Formative assessment

“Although the majority of the questions focus on general knowledge and personal perspectives, they do not attempt to define what it means to be a “good citizen,” as that is something that is difficult, maybe impossible, to measure.”



Formative assessment

- Many teachers prefer not to formally grade when teaching about controversial topics because it may inhibit authentic participation or become performative
- *“We intentionally chose not to use formal methods, such as a checklist, because they felt that a formal evaluation process would be inhibitory to the students' participation. Their objective was to keep **the discussion as free and loose as possible**”* –Portuguese teacher
- Important to have individual conversations with students *‘to capture unseen internal reflection’*
- Important to share gratitude for the students engagement, especially when it's a heated discussion

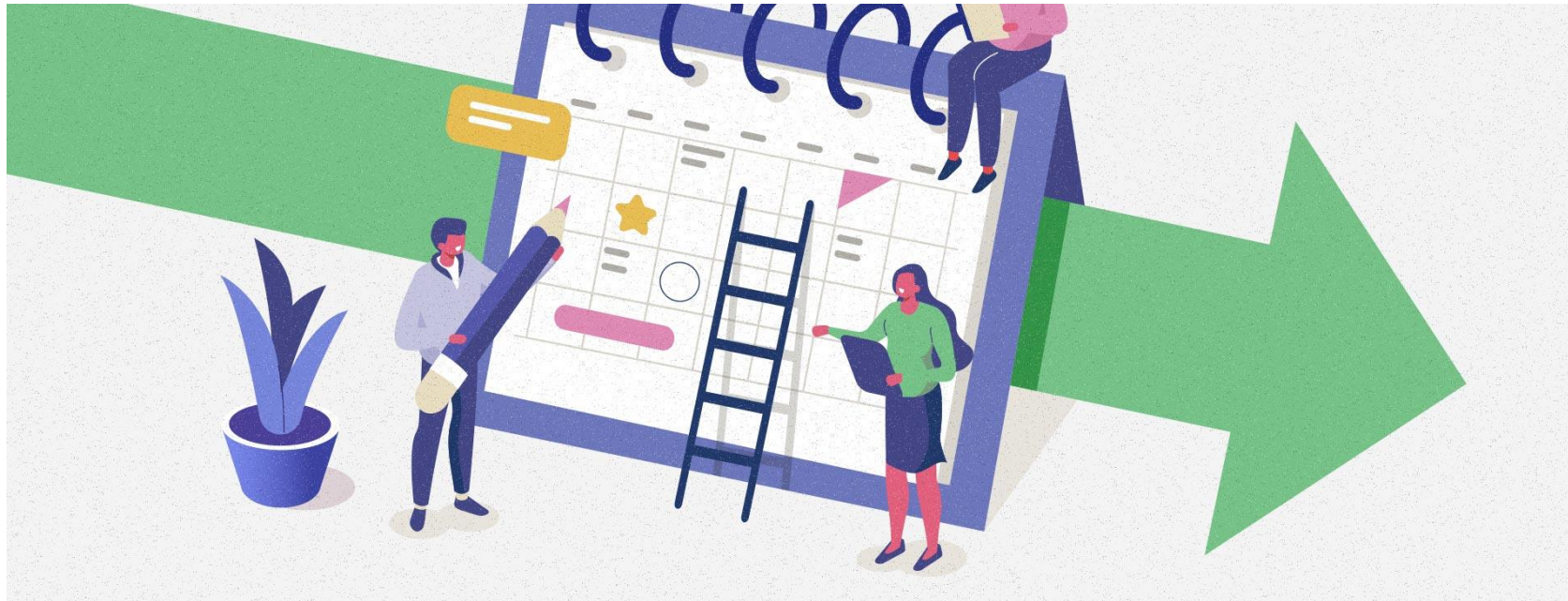
Focus on argumentation to assess

“I often encourage other students to express agreement or discordancy and ask them to justify their choices.”

- Information sources consulted
- Reasoning processes
- Ability to identify weaknesses or counterarguments
- Critical self-reflection and meta-dialogue
- Example practice: Students write an opinion + include the strongest possible criticism of their own stance

Assess over a longer period of time

- Developing perspective-taking is a slow process that ideally requires multi-year assessment
- *“Changing your perspective on topics is a very slow process, thus assessment and evaluation should be throughout multiple years but teachers are not able to do so”*



Authentic and transparent assessment

- Authenticity: Let students decide whether they make a poster, poem, essay, spoken word performance and have them make a selection to show to their peers
- Transparency such as *live marking* during conversations
- Make it concrete enough

“Not all teachers at school do this and clarify, for example, ‘being respectful’ in the assignment. You have to explicitly substantiate this to avoid discussions and arbitrariness on the part of the teacher.”

Collaborative assessment

- With students

"I discuss the assessment criteria with the students... We even build assessment rubrics with the various items"

- Different teachers
- People from outside the school (experts, parents, ...)
- Collaborative learning such as two stage exams (Brett Giley University of Manitoba)
 1. Individual exams
 2. Take exams again in groups → retaining content much better

Summative assessment

Mixed positions:

- Some insist students do not take activities seriously unless graded
- Others avoid summative grading

Summative elements used when needed:

- Written essays or opinion pieces
- Argumentation
- Creative tasks (audiovisual or artistic)
- Some categories for attitudes are uses
- Rubrics for debates or oral skills

Subject-specific goals

Minimal standards?

“In the case of the topic of climate, for example, there is also a minimum score that everyone must achieve. The lower limit tells us where everyone must reach, and if they don't, a remedial assignment follows. Completing the assignment is considered more important than the final result or whether it is right or wrong.”

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Examples of assessments

Exchange in two groups

Two groups:

1. Online group: Nadra Beyram, Ivone Oliveira, Dulce Alferes Soares, Luis Tavares, Snejana → Discuss examples 1, 2 and 3
2. Physical group: Dorien Doornebos, Thomas Van Roey, Mirjam de Ruiter, Mohamed Elfassi, Maïke Lolkema → Discuss examples 4,5 and 6

Discuss the three examples in your group. Focus on strengths and challenges of these assessment practices



1. Make your own artwork and reflect

- Addressing a current social or political issue
- Produce an audiovisual, literary, or artistic piece

Schools usually tiptoe around violence, self-harm, social abuse, and sexually harmful behavior. We use artistic mediums where students experience, question, and reshape difficult realities.

Method Pillars:

- Students stage real scenarios: Spectators become “spect-actors,” stepping in to try solutions.
- Essays & Narrative Writing - Students write from perspective of victim, aggressor, bystander. They explore the motivations behind harmful behavior, not just condemn it.
- Video & Visual Art – “Frame the Problem” Short films, photo series, or mixed-media pieces illustrate how violence or self-harm actually looks. Students work in groups to avoid isolation around sensitive themes. Artworks serve as conversation starters for guided discussion.



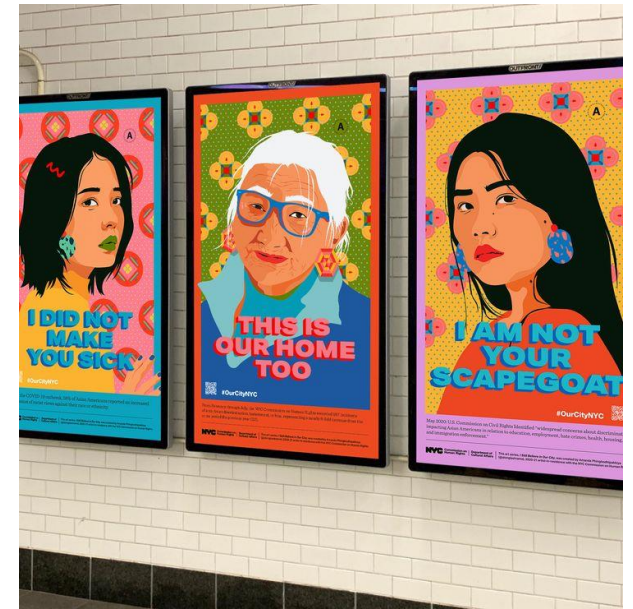
1. Make your own artwork and reflect

- Reflection questions - how the artworks are conveyed: does this impact the message?

‘How would an audience reflect on your artwork when you share it on social media?’

‘How would an audience reflect on your artwork when it is in a museum?’

‘How would an audience reflect on your artwork when it is on the street?’



2. Gender and science

- Students make an illustration of scientists
- The teacher introduces Amanda Weltman, a female South African astrophysicist and they go into her story
- Whole-class discussion
- Research biographies of women who have made significant contributions to science
 - create posters aimed at disseminating awareness within the school community.
- Values themselves are difficult to evaluate, but it is important that feedback is given on each other's values during the conversation.
- Self-evaluation

"For me to write criteria I need to have something I can see. What I can see are attitudes, skills and knowledge. I can measure that. But for me it is very difficult to measure and give feedback on values. But I know that the values are very important for your attitudes, so your attitude and knowledge and skills reflects the values that you have inside. They are deeply inside, so I should not assess them. I think this is important for the future, not that everything is the same, people should be different." – Teacher

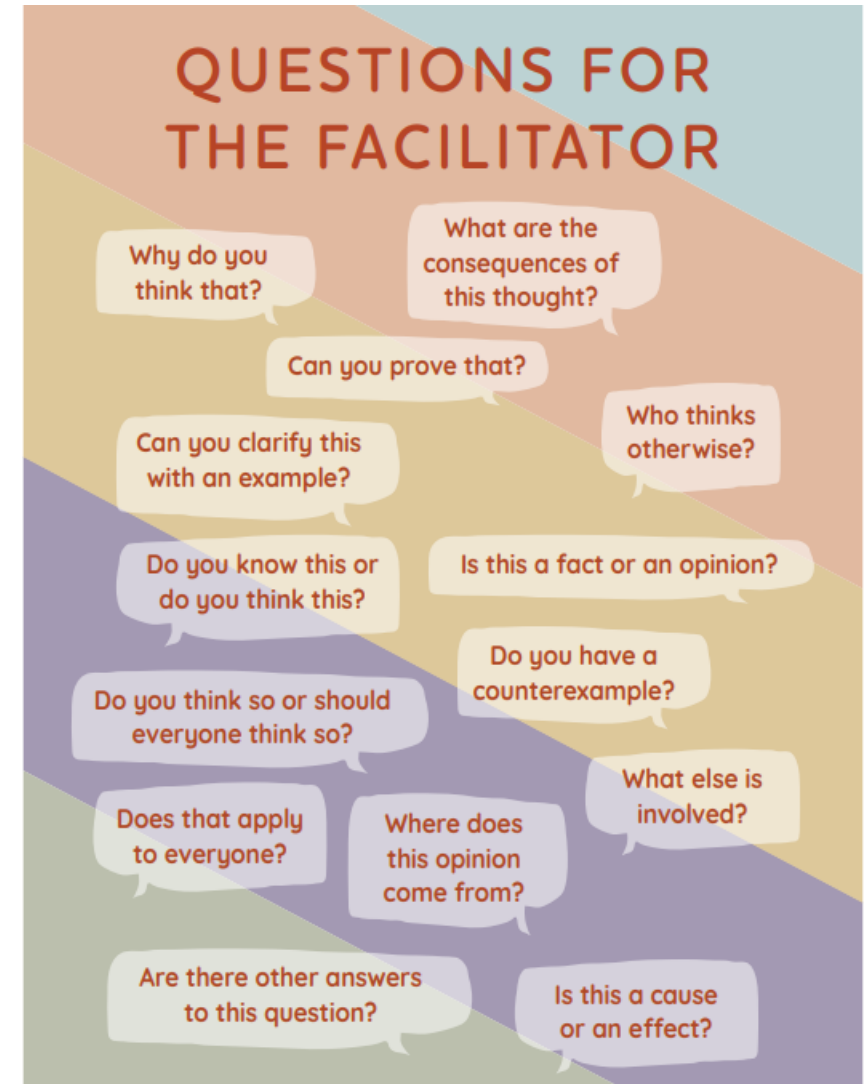


3. General meta reflection questions

Important to close off lessons on controversial topics with a meta reflections or discussion

- What insights remain?
- Are there still questions?
- How did you experience these lessons?
- Did everyone agree on the way we had the discussion?

Conversations often is at a standstill if there is a guilt question. Asking '*what factors contribute to...?*' is a better way to have an open dialogue than asking '*who's fault is this?*'



4. Sustainability online role play

Students have to create and post an online alter ego on the theme of sustainability

- A climate change denier (It's just nature taking its course)
- A climate change activist (Greta Thunberg for president!)
- A person who doesn't deny that climate change is a real problem, but doesn't make changes in their personal life (we have to live, don't we?)
- A person who recognizes that we need to do something, and has recently started making small changes in their daily life (recycling, taking the bus instead of the car, etc.)

Students focus on actions to make posts e.g. Vegan cooking and posting and thinking about communication strategies: two posts per week

Teacher facilitates online, role 'puppeteer' by provoking or asking questions if the discussion comes at a stand-still'

Focus evaluation on language for English on Instagram posts and 'live' chat language
use Teams and citizenship: substantiate argumentation
with sources in your role



4. Sustainability online role play

The fact that the students were also encouraged to take on roles with different viewpoints than their own, **made her avoid the risk of assessing their values** and rather focus on language abilities and critical thinking. She explains about the online chat assessment:

“They prepare in a different way, it is a more fun way of being assessed, where you are – again – in a role. You are not yourself, so you can go all in.”

“So if you are in denial about climate change but you have to take on the role as an activist, you will learn a lot about another view, which can help you understand more about people’s opinions, how they are formed, also when you play a “hoaxer” you enter down the “rabbit holes”, and understand what happens when people become extreme.”

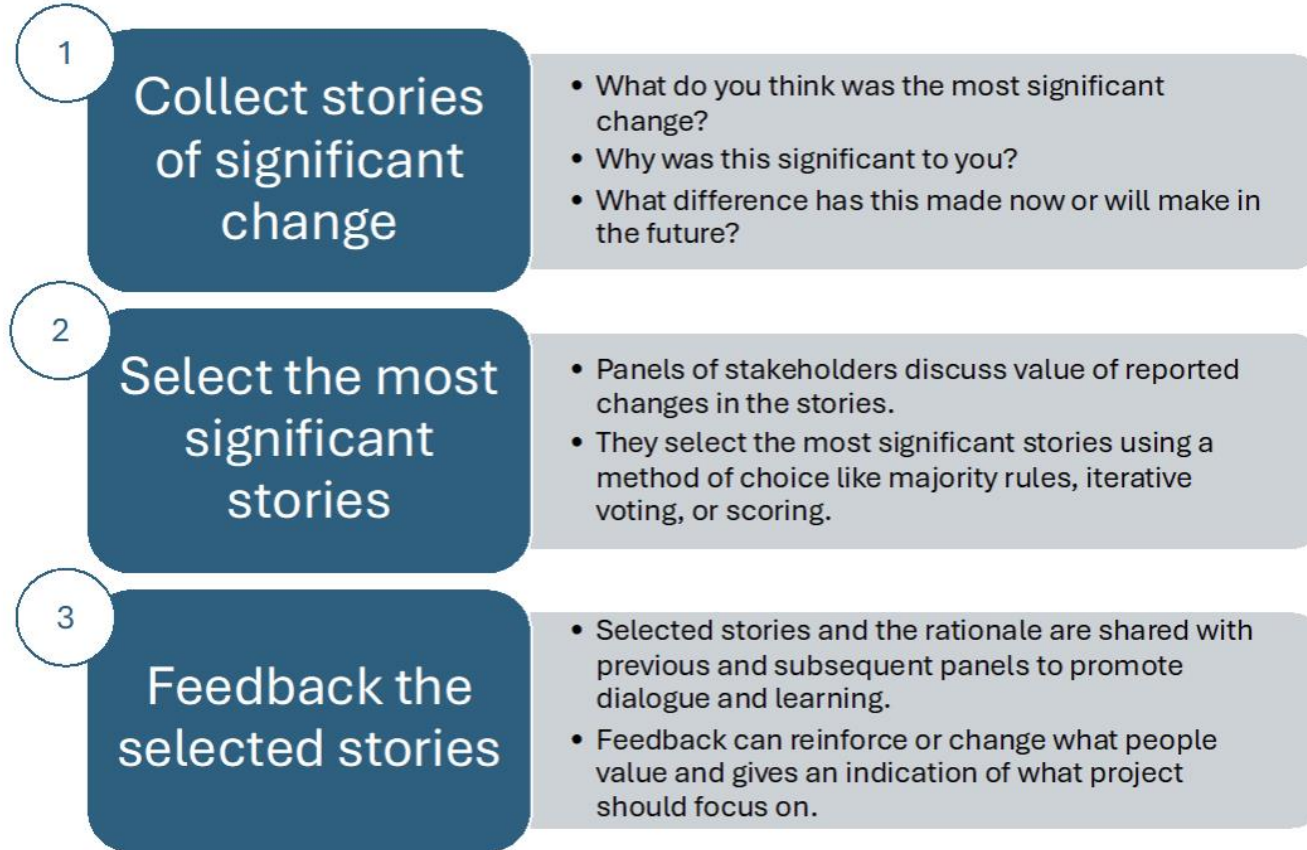
5. Most significant change

1. Collect stories of significant change (could be about the topic of your project or a general reflection of CE competences) in groups
2. Select the most significant stories
3. Share and feedback on the selected stories



5. Most significant change

How Does MSC Work?



6. Creating an audio library

- Students read many books about society
- We let students write small texts, short presentations and prepare their for whole classroom discussions
- They make audio reviews about books they read and listen to each others reviews
- Ask them to give peer feedback, present the pros and cons about their work



6. Creating an audio library



3

Conclusion

Assessment when dealing with controversial topics

“While such assignments can provide insight into what students have learned, the most meaningful moments—like a spontaneous classroom discussion—cannot and perhaps should not be measured. Teachers can observe growth in awareness, but they recognize that not everything of value can be captured through formal assessment.”

Assessment when dealing with controversial topics

- Mostly formative, sometimes summative
- Trial and error
- There is often a lack of school guidance about assessment
- Own role of teachers

“After the first training session in Antwerp with that safe space and brave space, I thought, for example: okay, my classroom is safe anyway, but how do I make it brave, how do I do that? Because I have such clear opinions about things and I am allowed to, well, I am not allowed to... I don't express them because it's not my job as a teacher to express them. But how do you ensure that they can do so? And then what? But this was a very clear guideline. You can talk about controversial topics. By letting go of that control, because they are in groups and they also feel safer in those groups, because I'm not watching them all the time to see what they're going to say. So then they dare to do it more.”

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Questions? Remarks?

Thanks!



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