

Uncontroversial project: key insights

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UNCONTROVERSIAL



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- Which topics are seen as most controversial by teachers and students?
- What are obstacles and good practices teachers experience in their schools to deal with controversial issues?
- What are possible teacher positions when teaching about controversial issues?

Most controversial topics



The Netherlands	Bulgaria	Portugal	Belgium
Racism, Israel-Palestine, Gender & LGBTQIA+, Politics	Social status, Gender & LGBTQIA+	Religion; Mental health; Politics; Racism; Gender & LGBTQIA+	Israel-Palestine, Gender & LGBTQIA+, Racism & white privilege

Obstacles

The Netherlands	Bulgaria	Portugal	Belgium
• Polarisation amongst students (high pressure on classroom as a safe environment); • Tension between remaining neutral & act as a moral guide; • Lack of pedagogical tools; • Emotional load; • Practical constraints; • Language and cultural barriers	• Use of offensive labels among students (f.e. nerd, autistic ...); • The influence of parents; • Cyberbullying and aggression transferred from virtual to real-life interactions; • Lack of pedagogical tools.	• Practical constraints; • Lack of pedagogical tools & professional development; • Lack of guidance in the national curriculum; • The influence of parents.	• Practical constraints; • A lack of diversity in the teacher team; • Lack of pedagogical tools & professional development; • The influence of parents.

Good practices

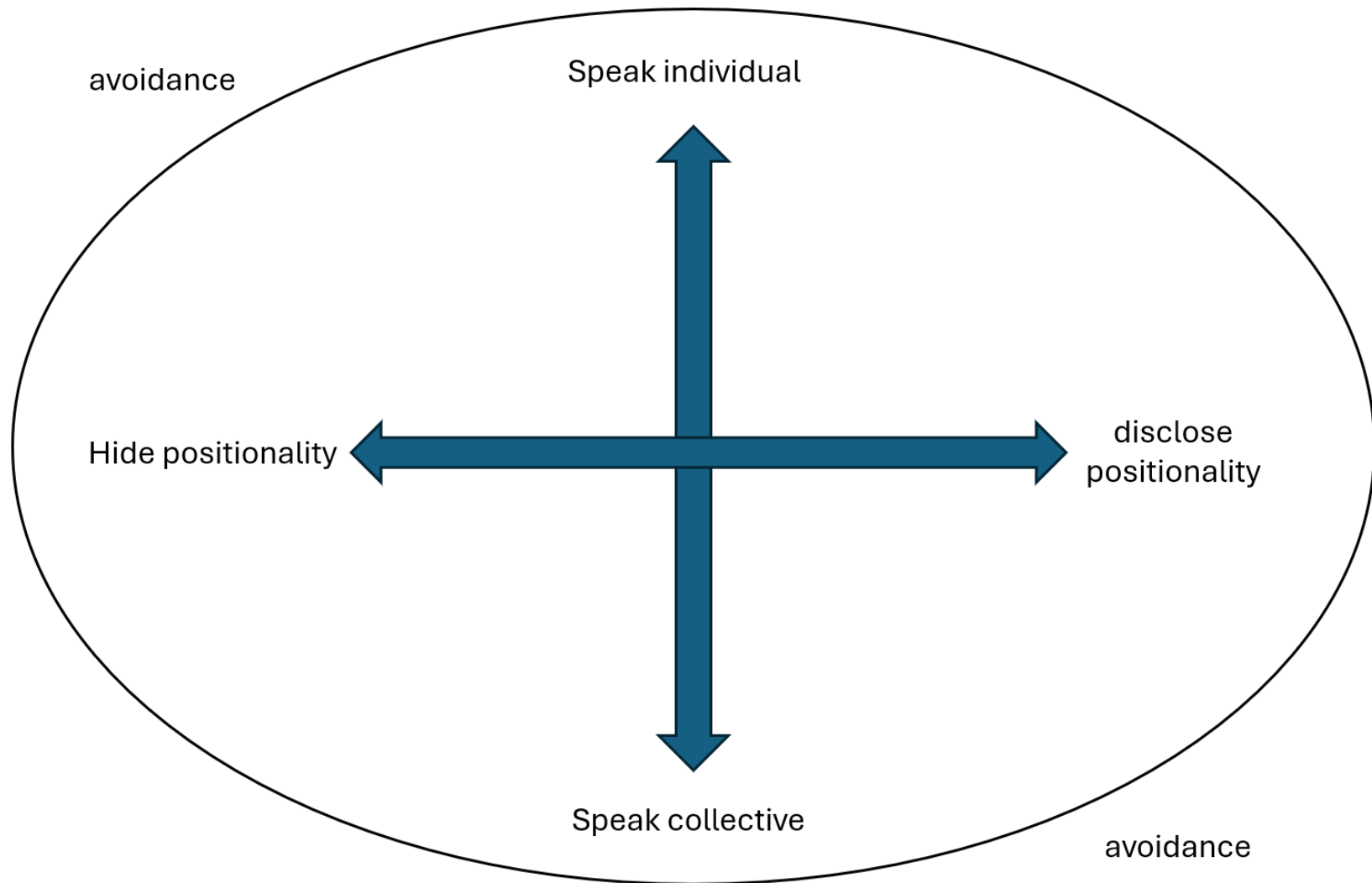
The Netherlands	Bulgaria	Portugal	Belgium
• Ground rules for dialogue before starting discussions; • The use of personal stories; • Preparing themselves with 'factual information' & reliable resources; • Collaboration among colleagues; • Acknowledging emotions in the classroom.	• Involving parents & institutions in discussing controversial topics (collective approach); • Building trust by having individual conversations with students in difficult situations; • Introducing topics with real guests and cultural representatives.	• Research project with students about controversial topics; • Collaboration among colleagues; • Support from professionals/specialists (f.e. a nurse to adress birth control); • Role playing; • The use of digital tools (f.e. Tricider/Kialo) to debate.	• Exercise their skills by starting with more 'safe' topics; • Question thoughts & observations instead of feelings; • Needs analysis together with students before approaching the controversial topic; • Collaboration among colleagues; • Highlighting the importance of language.

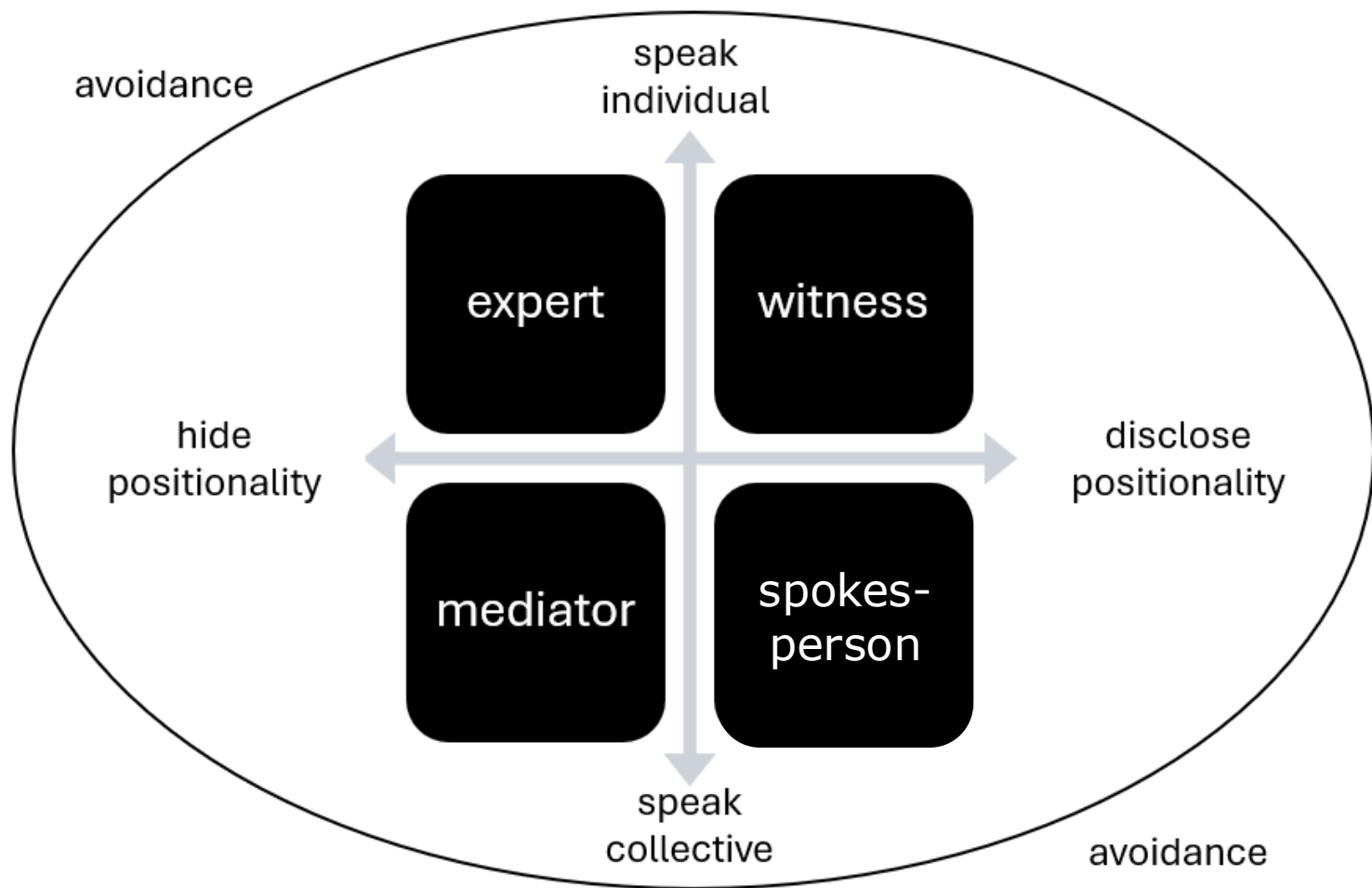
Teacher positions

Can/should I stay neutral?

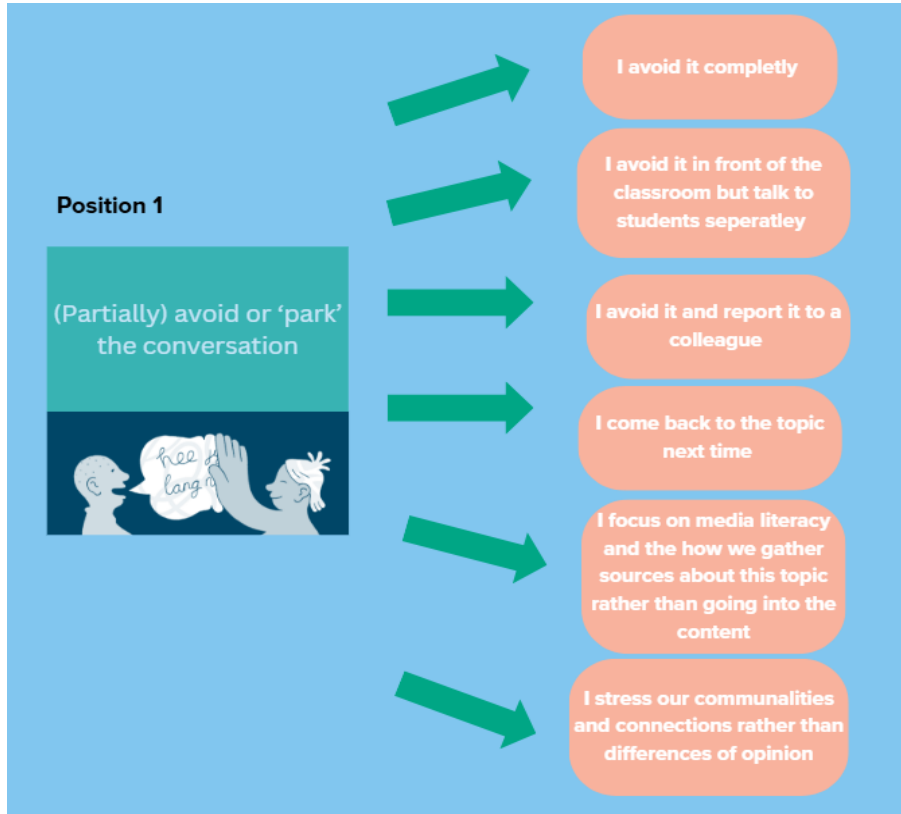
Do I share my own stories or experiences?

What if I feel engaged in a topic?





Positions teachers



"let's just stick to the curriculum objectives. And everything that comes with it, if it's about Palestine or gender, that's just me, I'm not going to get into it."

"I think the LGBTQ+ theme is almost completely avoided here. That's because I know that some of my colleagues explicitly avoid it because they themselves belong to that group and feel that they don't want to get into that discussion because it's too personal, and I understand and respect that."

Positions teachers

Position 2

Act as an expert



Approach

Room for perspective
of expert only

Discuss students
perspectives and share
knowledge

- not disclose personal thoughts, opinions, or beliefs
- speaks with personal expertise: he or she strives towards objectivity, and/or introduces factual knowledge into a discussion

"Stating knowledge is to enrich your context and world views, not to convince you"

"A video on homosexuality: not asking their opinions but what is happening, what is the context, to put knowledge first"

"You should never judge. Always play the facts: [according to you] three million refugees come here every year, well let's see how many there really are."

Positions teachers

Position 3

Act as a witness



Approach

Room for perspective of
witness only

Discuss students
perspectives and share
own experience or
thoughts

Share and discuss perspectives

"When discussing theories, afterwards I sometimes gave my opinion when asked. Not just like that. And I always added, I always emphasized that other opinions were also valid, that it was important to respect those different opinions. I always emphasized that."

"I often see myself as one of the exemplary adults, as one of the possible opinions they hear"

"I believe you cannot have a discussion about gaybashing, and then not say wholeheartedly; guys this is not my opinion."

Positions teachers

Position 4

Act as a spokesperson



Approach

Room for perspective
of spokesperson only

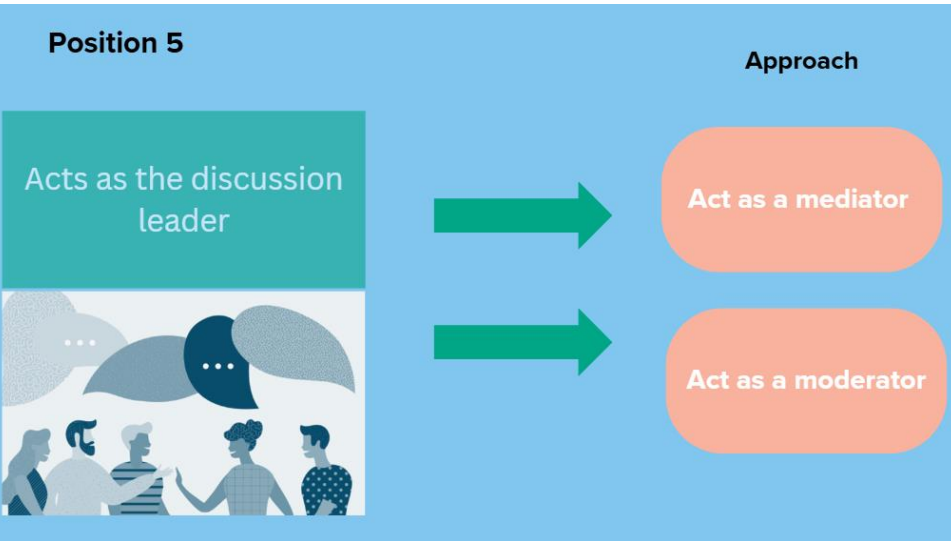
Discuss students
perspectives and share
group perspective

Teacher finds human rights important:
"Teacher should not shy away and always be 'neutral', we should refer to human rights declaration as we live in a country who signed those – based on that teachers can make a ranking in behaviour. Going back to fascism example: insight on the processes but demonstrating it is not within such a declaration."

Teachers speaks up for minority groups: *"I feel the same way about LGBTQ issues, and the position has always been that minorities should not be oppressed or always sidelined."*

Teacher states clear boundary for discussion:
"Negationism is forbidden by law, we are not going to discuss that"

Positions teachers

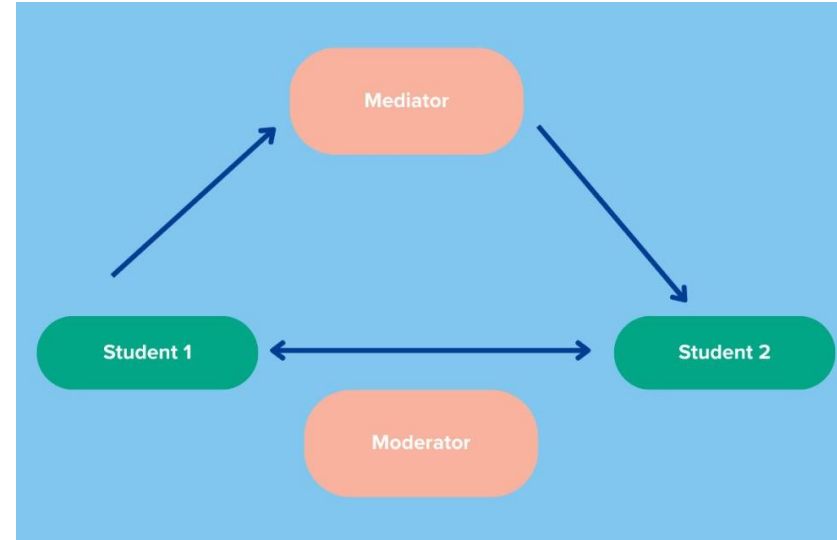
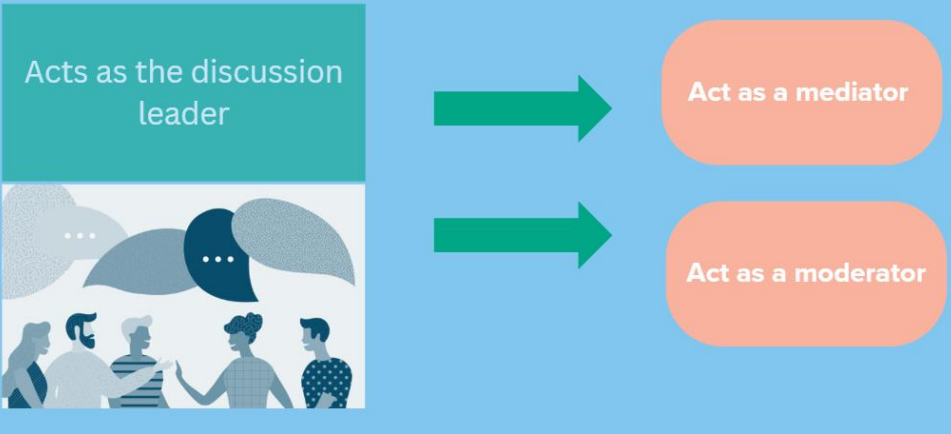


“As a teacher, I want to be as neutral as possible, and be there for everyone. That's difficult when it's so intense.”

“I always see it as if just two people are fencing with each other, so to speak, and you stand there as a kind of jury member.”

Positions teachers

Position 5



Moderator: “I don't take a position, no matter how heated it gets. I think it's mainly about listening to opinions and trying to give counterarguments in questioning. For me, that always worked, that is, it often worked.”

Mediator: “If I talk to students, I say they can feel powerless or angry, talking about it is very useful. I approach the conversation a bit like a mediator as I used to be in a previous job, the powerfulness of letting them tell their stories.”

Conclusions



- Teachers frequently switch positions and strategies but have certain patterns
- Topic and context specific

“I think it's important that this is situational, I don't think that for every kind of lesson, if you hear something, you should engage with this.”

Conclusions



- Showing opinions and vulnerability as a personal choice to enable themselves to set boundaries during a controversial discussion

“Yes, and I also say: if it becomes too much for me, I always tell the class. If it gets too overwhelming for me, then I step out. I end the discussion and let someone else take over. I am very honest about that. At that moment, I just cannot do it, so I also think it’s okay to be vulnerable in that sense, as a teacher.”