

ARTICLE

A PEDAGOGY OF DE-POLARISATION FOR EDUCATION, FROM COLD TO HOT TOPICS

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Young people across Europe are suffering from multiple crises. They are confronted with a war in the Ukraine, a climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Next to these there is an increasing social crisis. In well-functioning democracies crises are solved by dialogue between different stakeholders, but there is suggestion that the trust that some parts of society have in authorities is eroding. Teachers are experiencing how societal polarisation is becoming prominent in the classroom and often is fuelled by social media used for spreading misinformation and fake news.

Public schools (i.e. not private) are one a few places where youngsters from different social and cultural backgrounds still meet. Therefore, schools can function as a lab for democracy and citizenship. By having discussions about difficult topics students can learn how to solve problems peacefully together. In addition, students should become aware that it is fine to disagree in a democracy. At the same time, too much polarisation between groups of people can be dangerous for the stability of a democracy. This means that students should learn how to deal with conflict constructively. To help teachers in doing so, this article proposes a pedagogy of de-polarisation for education.

Conflict and polarisation

To start, it is important to note that conflict and polarisation are related but not the same. Conflict means a serious disagreement or clash. Because people are different, they can have different perspectives and subsequently different emotions about specific topics. This ultimately means that conflicts will always be there. Conflicts are not necessarily bad and are inherently part of democracy. If students can engage in a constructive dialogue about conflicts they also can provide an opportunity for learning about different viewpoints and arguments. Unfortunately, most people are not very good in conflict and find it difficult to speak out or to listen to each other. Conflict can lead to polarisation in society when groups are mobilised in “us and them” thinking. Polarisation becomes problematic when students start to think in more extreme and simplistic frames about each other.

Identity

Students can become more extreme in their beliefs when their (group) identities are threatened. In general, people like to have a positive image of their own (group) identity and when this identity is threatened, they can become more extreme in their beliefs and less open for other perspectives. Other reasons why youngsters can get more extreme in their beliefs are the experience of injustice, or lack of certainty or safety about their primary life conditions. In such cases youngsters

tend to create narratives that provide safety, and it becomes less relevant if their narratives are based on scientific facts. In schools, students should be stimulated to discuss topics from multiple perspectives, but students can also be encouraged to be critical of simplistic or polarising narratives. Finally, discussing controversial topics from multiple perspectives does not mean relativism as within democracies there are moral boundaries and claims should be underpinned with arguments.

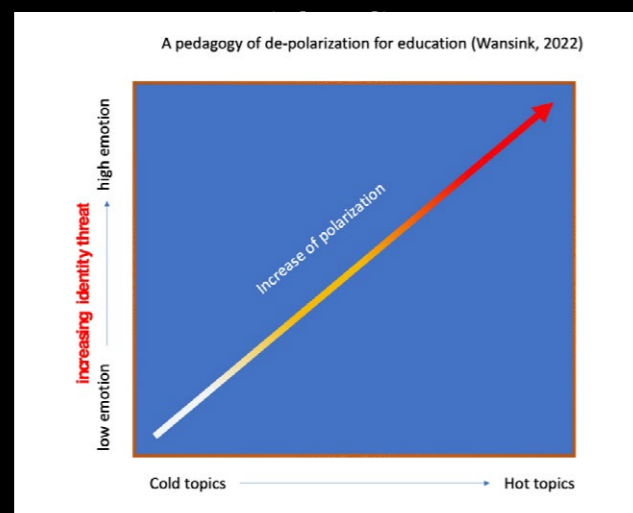
A model of teaching hot and cold topics

Research and previous RAN Practitioners meetings show that discussing controversial issues can be difficult for teachers. Constraining factors can be insufficient teaching time, a packed curriculum, or perceived lack of topic knowledge. Teachers can also be worried how to respond to students’ extremist ideologies and intense emotional reactions. However, teachers should not directly be over-worried about the emotions of students. The question is how to deal with these? Therefore, this article proposes a pedagogy of de-polarisation for education, which is depicted in Figure 1.

The depicted figure of a pedagogy of de-polarisation consists of two axes. The vertical axe stands for increasing emotions. When students will be more threatened in their identity it is likely that their emotions will increase. In general, this means that a discussion in the classroom can become more intense and difficult. The oblique line in the figure shows that in such case polarisation in the class between students might increase (i.e., the red part of the line). The horizontal axe stands for the discussed topic and starts with cold topics and then these topics increasingly become hotter. Figure 1 shows that cold topics do not trigger an identity threat as the students’ identities are not at stake. The oblique line in Figure 1 is white at the bottom indicating that it is unlikely that cold topics will cause polarisation in the classroom.

A pedagogy of de-polarisation means that teachers first practice discussions with students using cold topics, such as sports and extra-curricular activities. There are multiple benefits to start with cold topics. First, because students do not strongly identify with the topic, they likely will be more open for discussion and less emotionally involved. Second, teachers more comfortably can establish classroom rules about how to disagree about a topic (see Figure 2). Third, teachers can first practice their questions in a less heated discussion. When discussing a cold topic teachers can start with making an inventory of the different perspectives in the classroom. It is important to encourage students to reflect on their discussions. This can be done by asking questions about their sources, or why they have a specific moral view. Fourthly, during a discussion about a cold topic it is easier for teachers to create a safe classroom environment. Figure 2. Some examples of ground rules for discussion.

1. Acknowledge that opinions are often not right or wrong, but merely different.
2. Do not interrupt the speaker.
3. Support your views with evidence and examples.
4. It is okay to criticise what was said, but not the person expressing the opinion.
5. Listen and speak with the same respect you would like to be shown to you.



Final remarks

It should be noticed that especially in multicultural classes, students and teachers can disagree about what cold and hot topics are. This means that a teacher has to have knowledge about the backgrounds of his or her students. In general, a good starting point to make a hot topic colder is to search for a similar topic but then situated in another country or in the past. This approach can help in avoiding that students directly identify with the topic causing strong emotions. When teachers feel confident discussing cold topics they can start with discussing hotter topics. Finally, it is important that all students can participate and learn. Not all students feel comfortable contributing to a discussion, especially when having a minority viewpoint in the class. Therefore, teachers also can think of other activities to learn about sensitive topics or for example use art.

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