

# How to Talk about Political Conflicts with Students?

Guidelines prepared by  
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## Introduction

Erasmus University Rotterdam hosts a diverse student body, representing a multitude of cultural and national backgrounds spanning countries worldwide. Amidst prevailing political instability, conflicts, and divisive dialogues, the EUR community recognizes the imperative to engage in discussions about their experiences and sentiments on these pressing issues. Assurance of a sense of safety is also crucial for the staff and students at EUR. Consequently, educators are in the position to guide students in navigating their emotions and thoughts in a manner that is both productive and respectful within the academic environment.

Recognizing that classrooms serve as influential spaces to discuss current events and the associated challenging subjects; educators must remain attuned to the emotional impact these events may have upon their students. Prior to initiating discussions, it is advisable for teachers to seek guidance from resources aimed at fostering an environment conducive to civil discourse.

At the IDEA Center, we consistently strive to reach out and listen to everyone, in a respectful way. This helps us to learn about diverse perspectives, exchange ideas and viewpoints and foster a sense of caring for one another as fellow human beings. Therefore, this manual is also designed with the aim to provide educators guidance on how to have conversations around sensitive political issues with their students with respect and empathy, help them in processing the information,

and engage in dialogues that uphold and contribute to the Erasmian values of 'connecting' and 'open-minded'. In this guide you'll find more tools and resources<sup>1</sup> related to specific topics covered in these guidelines, prepared by other universities who've worked on this subject.

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1 The resources shared in these guidelines originate from universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia. This selection was made with the understanding that the diversity and inclusion (D&I)-related issues addressed by universities in these regions share similarities to a certain extent. In our commitment to sharing diverse perspectives, we also learned about the D&I topics emphasized by universities in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Our findings reveal that universities in these regions place a significant focus on issues such as the international mobility of student, gender-based discrimination particularly in fields of study like STEM, and fair access to higher education by addressing widening disparities and inequalities.

# Before the Discussion

## Start with Yourself

### Acquire Knowledge on the Subject

Entering a discussion with an open acknowledgment of not possessing complete knowledge, or with the intention of learning collaboratively alongside students, is entirely acceptable and often beneficial but having a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand can be empowering for you as an educator. Long-standing conflicts involving multiple international actors, become increasingly intricate over time. Familiarizing yourself with the history and context of the conflict is crucial for comprehending the complexities and emotions involved for all parties. This knowledge equips you to engage in more nuanced conversations with students on the subject.

### Learn about Yourself

Your positionality significantly shapes your comprehension and management of situations. We tend to view the world through a lens that is led by our multiple identities - be it gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion - and the diverse array of experiences we've encountered. When we acknowledge our biases in areas where our understanding might be limited, and are able to communicate about it, we open ourselves to perspective-taking. This involves stepping away from our familiar viewpoints and examining events from entirely new perspectives. Utilizing practical tools like the 'Social Identity Map' (check the resource section for the map) or engaging in reflective questioning can be incredibly beneficial in delving deeper into our emotions, triggers, and responses.

## Build Your Safe Space

Be mindful of your well-being and don't feel obligated to steer a discussion, without prior preparation, if you do not feel confident to do so because of your emotions or the atmosphere in the classroom. Conflict situations often provoke anxiety and fear. If you find yourself struggling with your mental well-being or wish to address any unwelcome behavior, don't hesitate to seek support from a [confidential counselor](#) or [Safe@EUR](#).

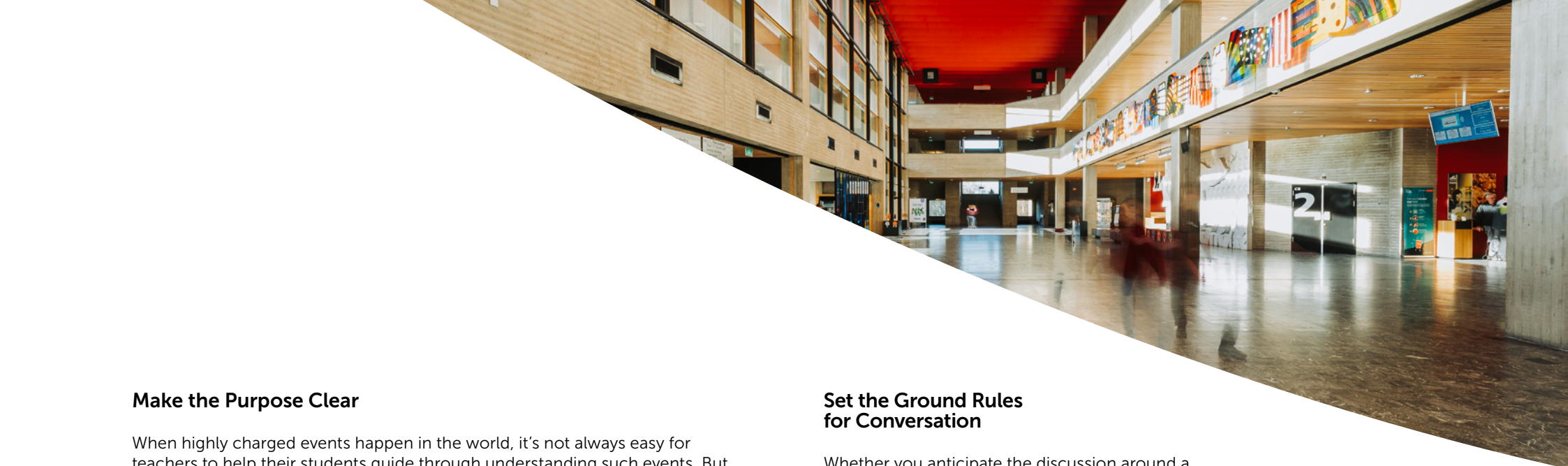
### Resources to understand and practice self-reflection as an educator

The paper [Positionality in Teaching: Implications for Advancing Social Justice](#) explains the importance of modeling vulnerability and self-assessment as educators in discussions about identity. It suggests that focusing on "being" rather than just "doing" is essential, as it helps students reflect on power dynamics and encourages a more open and accepting learning environment.

[The Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research](#) helps to reflect on the interrelationships among different aspects of our social identity, highlighting how it influences our perspectives and interactions with the environment.

The section 'Bereid je goed voor' in the document [Lesson letter: How do you discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?](#), prepared by Utrecht University, helps in framing reflective questions to begin by introspecting personal knowledge and understanding of the subject.

The [Reflective Practice Questions](#) prepared by New South Wales Government (Education) serve as a tool for teachers to assess and improve their teaching methods. They cover a wide range of aspects, from lesson engagement and personal reactions to instructional strategies, ultimately promoting effective teaching and learning.



## Make the Purpose Clear

When highly charged events happen in the world, it's not always easy for teachers to help their students guide through understanding such events. But the truth is, students benefit from constructive discussions about sensitive issues. Before engaging in the discussion, elaborate what kind of learning goals will be achieved through it. The purpose of the discussion could be academic learning or personal development that can be connected to the learning goals of your course. For instance, promoting critical thinking among students, fostering an understanding for diverse viewpoints, and encouraging respectful conversations despite differences? Difficult dialogues are therefore an opportunity to foster skills in your students such as perspective-taking, empathy, deep-listening and intercultural awareness. This in turn contributes to a more informed, inclusive, and democratic society.

### Resources on shaping discussions in alignment with the learning outcomes

The article [Professional Judgment and Deciding What to Teach as Controversial](#) offers guidance to teachers on making judgments when incorporating difficult topics into their teaching. The article identifies key professional judgments teachers must make, such as critically examining the issue and determining which aspects are open to interpretation. It underscores that all difficult or contentious topics require careful consideration of evidence to promote informed classroom discussions.

The resource [Teaching with the News: Free lessons connect your classroom to headlines in the news](#), prepared by the Choices Programme, Brown University has sample lesson plans on significant current and historical issues.

## Set the Ground Rules for Conversation

Whether you anticipate the discussion around a difficult topic, or it comes up abruptly, setting the general rules of conversation in the classroom helps contribute to creating a safe learning environment where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued. You can create these rules together with the students. Plan, for example, a code of conduct exercise (check resources of this section for ideas) with your students where they can contribute their ideas on desirable and undesirable classroom behavior. In this process, ensure that every student feels their input mattered. You as an educator, can combine common ideas from students to create a list of rules that the class can refer to as and when needed (not necessarily during a particular discussion, but for classroom discussions in general). This helps students recall their personal and mutual expectations. As students also participate in setting up the classroom norms, they feel a sense of agency in the classroom management and are more likely to feel responsible for their role in the discussion.

### Resources for developing and implementing the ground rules of conversation

[How do I create an inclusive learning environment?](#) by Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Tufts University explains how community learning agreements or ground rules for discussion are crucial and suggests involving students in creating these rules. The approach aims to foster a positive and inclusive atmosphere for all students, considering their varied experiences and needs.

The [Group Agreements](#) resource from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University offers valuable insights into the importance of establishing group agreements. It delves into the reasons for creating such agreements, explores values and practices from both individual and group perspectives, and provides guidance on how to effectively create and uphold ground rules in the classroom setting.

See Chapter 1 '[Ground Rules](#)', pg. 22 in *A Handbook for engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*, prepared by the University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University. It is a comprehensive guide for faculty members, focusing on various aspects of teaching and classroom management in an academic setting. It is structured into several sections, each addressing different topics such as academic freedom, establishing discussion rules, discussion questions, and reflection.

## Make Use of Content and Trigger Warnings

Firstly, as an educator, if you chose to share any educational material that contains violent or distressing content, there should be a good contextual reason to do so. Students need to also understand that feeling some discomfort, while discussing sensitive or difficult topics, such as conflicts, could also mean academic growth and learning. As Jeff Handmaker says in his article in the Erasmus Magazine "[I would even say it is essential to feel uncomfortable, certainly from a critical-pedagogical standpoint.](#)" Having said that, ensuring, that students aren't subjected to dual distress, first from the effects of events (in focus) and then from classroom discussions, is important. A content warning is issued weeks before a topic is introduced (for example in the course guide), in anticipation of potential discomfort among some students. A trigger warning is an oral or written alert shared just before presenting potentially traumatic material, such as sexual assault or animal cruelty. In fostering an inclusive learning space, providing both content and trigger warnings is considered a 'good practice'. However, having these warnings should not imply that students can opt out of coursework or educators need to avoid such topics at all. It simply means that if a student is worried about re-experiencing trauma, they could let the teacher know in advance. The teacher could possibly suggest alternative content or learning activities.

## Resources on how to introduce and make use of trigger and content warnings in your teaching

The Resource [Using Trigger or Content Warnings on Your Syllabus](#) prepared by Teaching, Learning, and Professional Development Center of the Texas Tech University explains what content and trigger warnings are and suggests various instructions strategies on how they can be incorporated in the teaching practice.

[An Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings](#) prepared by College of LSA, University of Michigan provides an overview of the different types of content and trigger warnings and their importance in various contexts, such as media, education, and public speaking, highlighting how they help individuals avoid or prepare for potentially distressing material. It also offers practical guidelines on how to effectively implement these warnings, emphasizing sensitivity and inclusiveness in communications.



# During the Discussion

With all the preparations in place, it remains essential to adhere to a structured framework that can guide difficult conversations.

Engage with students and take the time to articulate, what do you (together with the students) aim to achieve through the discussion. Clarifying objectives not only helps students focus on the topic but also encourages their active participation. These objectives could align with the learning goals previously established for the course. Additionally, this might be a good moment to review the 'classroom norms'.

To sustain the discussion's focus and flow, consider the following steps.

## Prepare Guiding Questions

When engaging students with learning materials like case studies, podcasts, documentaries, or articles, whether in group settings or as a whole class, design questions that ignite discussion and encourage deeper analysis. This ensures both you and the students do not deviate away from the topic and the discussion's intended purpose.

See section - 'Ask Good Questions' – [Discussions, Eberly Center, Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation](#) Carnegie Mellon University emphasizes the importance of asking good questions in productive discussions, outlining different types of questions and common errors instructors make. It categorizes questions into various types like exploratory, challenge, relational, diagnostic, and more, each serving a unique purpose in eliciting specific responses.

## Plan Activities for Group Interaction

Think about activities that require students to open-up and share their perspectives, thoughts, and feelings. Encourage them to ask questions and inquire with respect.

## Dialogue vs. Debate

The purpose of debate is to win an argument, while dialogue encourages you to listen with the intent of understanding. Make sure students express their opinions with respect and listen to understand diverse perspectives. It's ok to challenge opinions in a respectful manner or correct each other's information with facts. You can also make use of the principles of non-violent communication (NVC) or the framework of classrooms as safe and brave spaces to facilitate meaningful dialogues. NVC offers a structure for a way of communicating that is empathetic, both towards oneself and others. It focuses on four key components: making clear observations without judgment, identifying, and expressing feelings, acknowledging underlying needs, and making requests. When engaging in discussions, especially on polarizing topics, instead of shifting the conversation towards political affiliations, it is essential to keep the focus on students' personal experiences, and feelings and needs that stem from these experiences. As an educator, it's also important to ensure that you keep a neutral stance, irrespective of your political preferences.



Check the [NVC toolbox](#) on the [IDEA Center Knowledge Platform for Inclusive Education](#). The toolbox outlines a model designed to enhance clarity and empathy in communication.

The book chapter [From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice](#) by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens explores the concept of creating environments conducive to meaningful dialogue on diversity and social justice issues by suggesting a shift from safe to brave spaces. The chapter outlines how facilitators can create brave spaces by setting appropriate ground rules and fostering an environment where participants are encouraged to engage deeply and authentically, even in the face of challenging or controversial topics.

### Acknowledge the Emotions

Be prepared for heightened emotions, particularly when discussing topics closely tied to personal identity. Rather than avoiding these emotions, use them as learning opportunities. As an instructor, monitor emotions, taking breaks for reflection as necessary. For instance, students could be encouraged to jot down their feelings and given time to collect themselves. Highly charged emotional situations in the classroom can derail a discussion. The following resources offer guidelines on how to de-escalate such a situation while taking care of the emotions.

#### Resources for Handling Intense Emotions and Redirecting De-Railed Conversations

See Section ‘Make Room for Emotions’ in [Teacher Guidelines, International Conflict Situations by Vrije Universiteit](#). It provides strategies for teachers to create a safe environment in the classroom during emotionally charged situations. Key recommendations include co-creating guidelines for interaction, fostering active listening, encouraging empathy, adapting the pace and intensity of activities, and following up with students.

[Working with Strong Emotions in the Classroom – A Guide for Teachers and Students](#) by University of Colorado Conflict Research Consortium offers strategies for teachers and students to handle emotional discussions effectively. It addresses both unexpected and planned emotional situations in classrooms, emphasizing the importance of understanding the source of emotions and responding appropriately. The guide suggests practical techniques such as using de-escalating language, empathic listening, respecting diverse identities, and reframing accusatory statements.

### Have a Moment of Reflection

Having some opportunity to reflect on what was achieved through the discussion, will allow students to understand better the value of the discussion. For example, you can ask students to summarize their key takeaways from the discussion and what would they like to address in the future. Additionally, students may reflect on their own behavior in maintaining a positive classroom environment. Reflection on both learning and behavior reminds students of their agency in classroom management.

‘Summarizing discussion and gathering student feedback’ - [Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics](#) by Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan emphasizes the importance of dedicating time at the end of a class session to summarize the main points discussed, as this helps students perceive the discussion as valuable. It suggests using the last five minutes for students to write a “Minute Paper,” answering questions about key learnings, remaining questions, and insights gained from others.

### Model the Behavior you Expect

Teachers serve as important role models for students. While facilitating discussions, it’s important to model inclusivity in language, address behaviors that disrupt the learning environment (like interrupting or making personal remarks), approach opinions with curiosity rather than judgment, and value silence by giving students the option to pass if they choose to.

[Facilitating Effective Discussions: Self-Checklist](#) by The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning of Brown University provides a comprehensive checklist for educators to reflect on their preparation and facilitation of group discussions. The checklist is divided into two main sections: Preparing for Group Discussions and Conducting the Discussion. The checklist emphasizes the importance of assessing learners’ readiness, initiating engaging topics, managing the flow of discussion, and ensuring all learners are involved. It also covers strategies for active listening, involving quieter learners, preventing domination by a few, and helping learners communicate clearly.

## Manage the Unexpected Hot Moment

Unexpected intense moments may arise during discussions, often escalating when students feel attacked or unheard. Despite thorough preparation and anticipation, teachers facilitating discussions might encounter challenging situations. At such junctures, it's crucial to pause and consider whether to continue the discussion immediately or revisit it later. This break allows space for emotions to settle and grants students an opportunity to reflect on the situation. Additionally, while pausing, ensure acknowledgment of students' emotions or concerns with empathy. Let students know that they can ask for a pause themselves by going outside the classroom, if they feel the need to do so. Planning a strategy to address the intense moment in the next class (or after a small break) can transform it into a valuable learning opportunity.

See [Hot Moments](#) designed by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam that offers a detailed analysis of 'hot moments' in educational settings, focusing on the dynamics at play during emotionally charged classroom situations. It categorizes these dynamics into three levels: interactional dynamics within the classroom, individual teacher dynamics, and contextual factors. The document emphasizes the importance of balancing intellectual challenge with personal dignity, and the need for teachers to develop skills in managing these moments effectively.



# Social and Emotional Support Resources

For certain students, wars evoke harrowing memories, personal bereavement, fear, and anxiety. Some individuals face hostility and may encounter aggression when they or their countries are held responsible for ongoing crises. Amidst an influx of information, diverse opinions, distressing news, and images easily accessible via social media, students struggle with processing this overwhelming data and often feel helpless. It's important to reassure students that they have access to university support for their mental well-being through various channels offered by the Education and Student Services. The Erasmus University Rotterdam has – [Student Psychologists](#), [Study Advisors](#) and [Confidential Counselors](#). Moreover, students often seek solace in community-building endeavors, where they can connect with like-minded individuals, fostering psychological safety and a sense of belonging. This [page](#) has an overview of the various student associations formally recognized by the EUR.



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