Co-Constructing Curriculum in Conflict

How and why teachers deal with divisive issues in the classroom: A literature review.

February 2026

Introduction

One of the distinctive challenges of contemporary citizenship and political discourse is that young people (and many adults) are inundated with instantaneous but unreliable information and images, including intolerant or extremist opinions, which can be encountered through everyday communication. Against this backdrop, existing approaches to teaching about controversial issues and online information may not engage with students' myriad situated experiences, strong emotions, or digital cultures and capabilities, which often remain disconnected from the planned school curriculum.

This project includes research teams in Canada, Croatia, and England, working with schools to explore teachers' and young people's experiences of how schools address divisive issues and intolerance. In each school we are:

- Talking to teachers to find out about their teaching practices and their experiences engaging with divisive contemporary issues in their local contexts.
- Talking to students about the divisive issues that affect them and their experiences of whether / how schools engage with these issues.
- Working with students and teachers to co-construct learning activities and resources to tackle divisive issues in schools in positive ways.

By the end of the project we will have produced some new guidance and materials for teachers, created a website with inspirational examples, and written advice for policymakers about how to support such work.

Whilst we are looking for new teaching solutions, we are also aware of how much work has already been done in this area. To capture some of the existing knowledge we conducted a literature review. We looked for research articles that described and / or evaluated teaching activities in relation to (i) controversial issues; (ii) media and digital politics; (iii) social conflict; (iv) conspiracy theories. We also added in some guidance documents from organisations that support teachers that we already knew about. We found 99 publications and as we reviewed them we extracted information about the teaching activities and the learning intentions the teachers were trying to achieve.

This booklet summarises:

- What kinds of activities have been used to teach divisive issues?
- What do teachers think their students will learn from studying divisive issues?

We are using this in the 4Cs project as a resource to help the students think about the range of possibilities they could use, and to help them identify new activities they could develop. We hope this will also be useful for teachers who are looking for a tool that could help them review their own practice and provide some inspiration for how to develop their planning or how to support non-specialist teachers.

Teaching Activities

A. Collaborative learning activities

1. Jigsaw These activities create specialist groups and then regroups students into home groups to learn from each other and think holistically. This requires students to work collaboratively, and it means they cannot succeed unless they cooperate, help each other, and listen to each other.

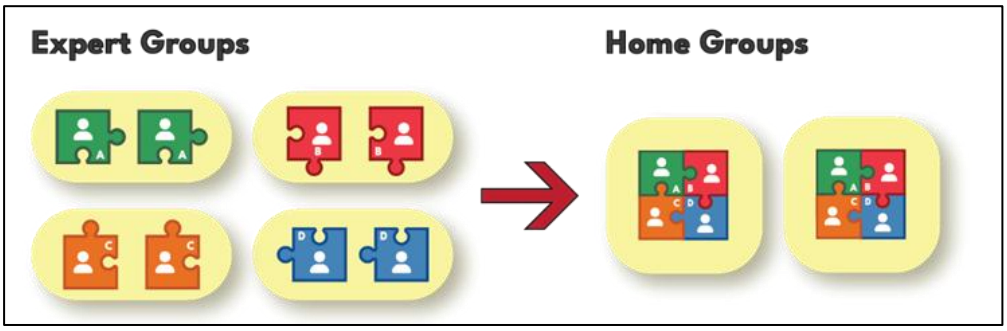


Image credit: Utah State University

How to organise the groups:

- Content: Typically teachers will divide up the content into different packs for the 'specialist' teams to work through. Then they can share their knowledge with others in home groups to build a more holistic overview. E.g. if you want to explore immigration you could set up groups to explore: (i) legislation, (ii) statistics and historical trends, (iii) politicians' views, (iv) media coverage, (v) migrants' testimony.
- Perspectives: Specialist groups can also be set up to explore the same information from different perspectives. This could involve using the same information with different briefings about diverse stakeholder groups e.g. consider immigration policy from the perspective of (i) an unemployed person, (ii) a police officer, (iii) a refugee, (iv) an international student, (v) a right-wing politician, and (vi) a liberal politician.
- Analytical thinking: Each specialist group can also consider an issue with a different thinking task in mind. This could include, for example, de Bono's thinking hats, where each group consider one way to think about the issue, but the home groups bring all the approaches together.

De Bono's thinking hats

- The White Hat calls for information known or needed. "The facts, just the facts."
- The Yellow Hat symbolizes brightness and optimism. Under this hat you explore the positives and probe for value and benefit.
- The black hat considers risks and difficulties.
- The Red Hat signifies feelings, hunches and intuition. When using this hat you can express emotions and feelings and share fears, likes, dislikes, loves, and hates.
- The Green Hat focuses on creativity - exploring possibilities, alternatives, and new ideas. It's an opportunity to express new concepts and new perceptions.
- The Blue Hat is used to manage the thinking process – the control mechanism.

Source: The de Bono Group

2. Evidence sorting The teacher provides students with a set of information cards, each of which has some kind of flaw which makes it less than wholly reliable. Working in pairs, students consider which cards they would use (yes, no, maybe). Students can then combine with another pair to compare answers. Finally, a whole class plenary can discuss (i) flaws in information and (ii) reasons for using information in arguments.

B. Talk-based activities

3. Fishbowl the teacher organises students into an inner and outer circle of students. The students on the inside talk about the issue to a partner, while those on the outside observe the talk and feedback before rotating to new partners. It's possible to stick to roles or enable students to swap between the inside and outside. The observers can comment on the process and dynamics of the discussion and help the class think about how to engage in discussions.

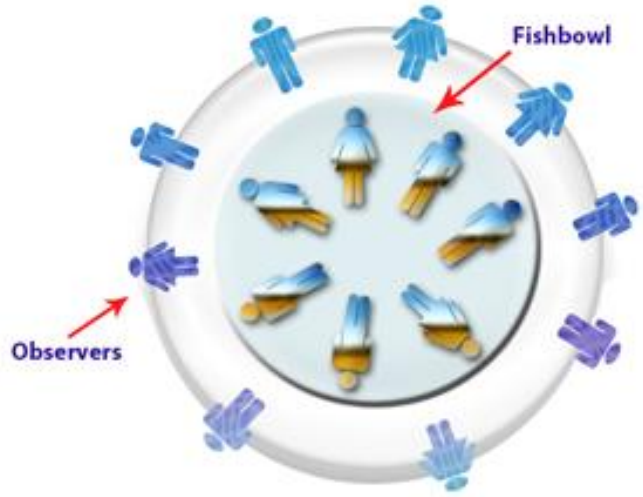


Image credit: Instruction Design Fusions

4. ***Opinion continuum*** Activities to declare and discuss different positions, for example, standing on a continuum line in class between agree / disagree. This could also be done using a simple board game, where students work in small groups to read out situation cards and play a counter to declare whether they disagree / agree / partly agree and then offer a reason to their peer group.

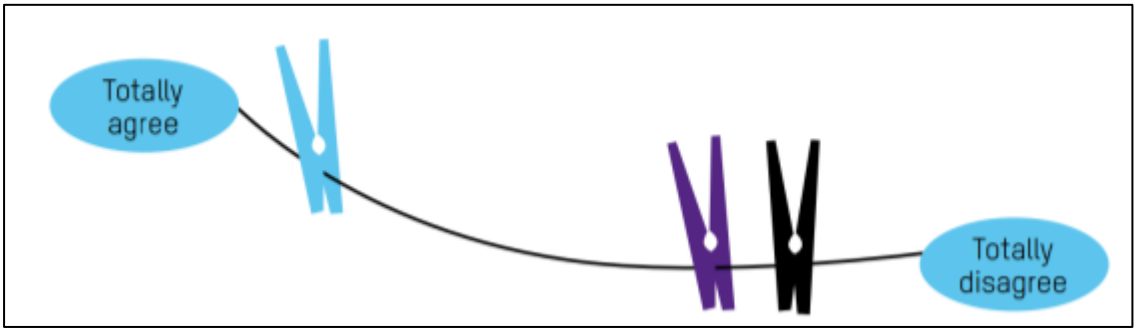
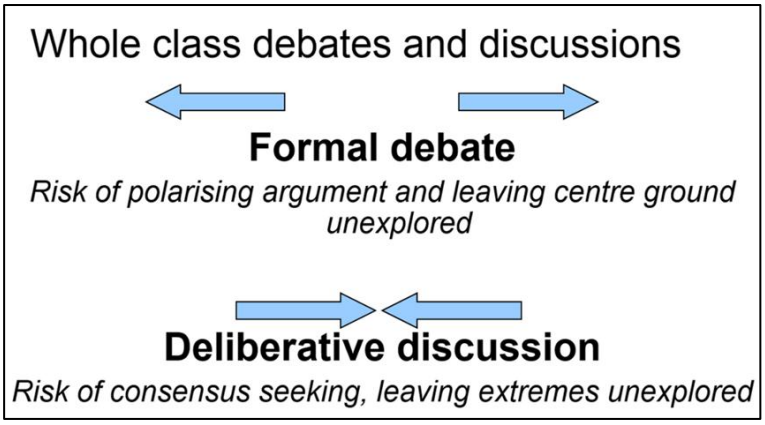


Image credit: Oxfam

5. Deliberative conversations which include (i) considering different viewpoints, (ii) evaluating evidence, (iii) looking for some common ground to establish a solution. The talk here may be collaborative and exploratory, so people build on others' opinions and revise arguments as they proceed. The goal is to help participants devise solutions, partly through making their own compromises.[1]

6. Formal competitive debates split the group of debaters into for / against a motion and argue consistently for your side of the debate and try consistently to undermine the arguments of people on the other side. The goal is to win the debate. This can either be decided by a class vote, or by the teacher (or peers) marking the contributions and awarding points.



7. Blended discussions use online discussion boards to extend a class discussion over a few sessions. Host a blog / discussion forum over the same timescale, so students feel able to contribute thoughts in between lessons. This will help people reflect on and change their views; as well as including those who are too shy to speak in class. This could also be extended with an inter-school elements to learn from others beyond your own local area.

C. Building arguments

8. Teach arguments Teach a model of how to build a convincing argument (e.g. using Toulmin's 6 elements) and then give students time to construct a robust argument on a topic of interest. Test out those arguments in a class discussion or in paired peer feedback. Write down how you would try to convince someone who disagreed with you.

[1] There is an example of learning resource here https://www.esu.org/news-and-views/discussing-controversial-issues-in-the-classroom/

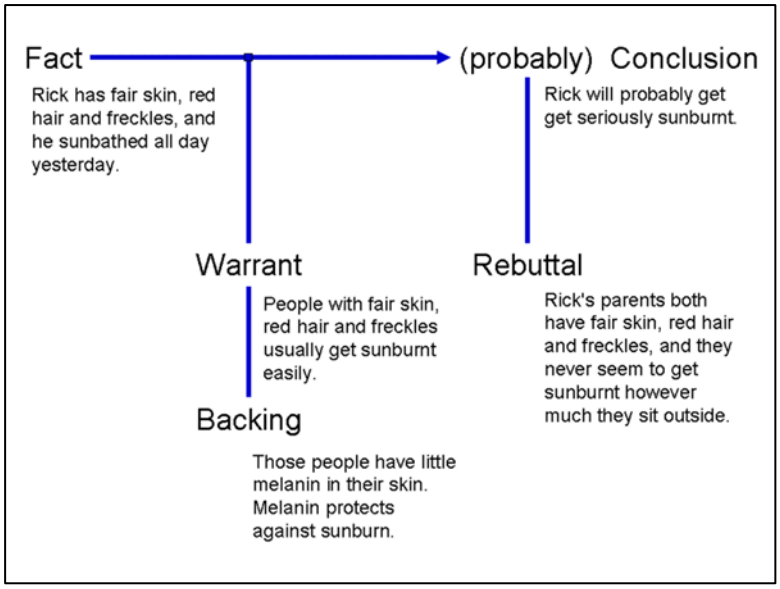
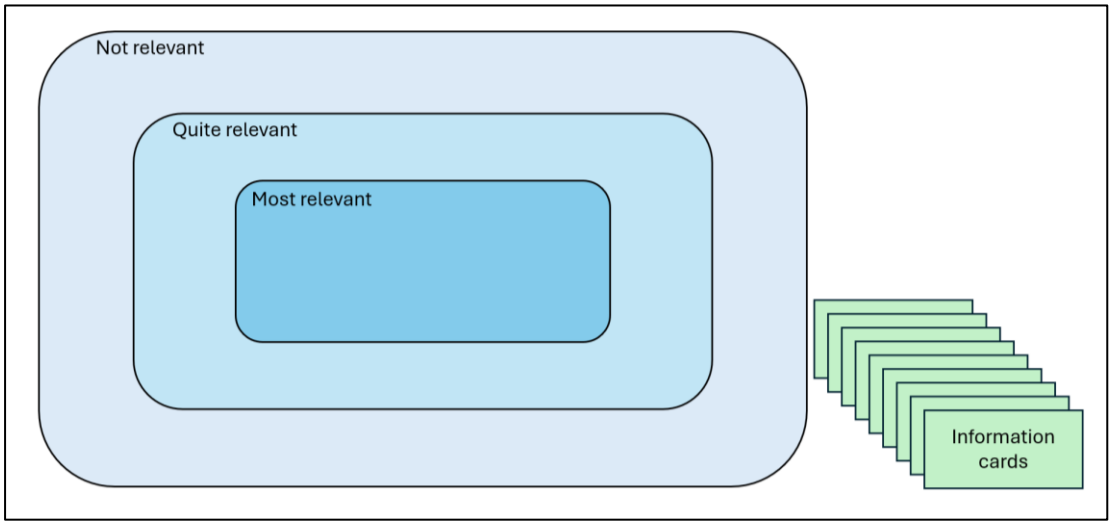


Image credit: Lumen Learning

9. Zone of Relevance Provide information packs with statistics, policies, media stories, testimony, expert opinion, research findings etc. Ask students to identify which information is most relevant to the debate and explain why. Then use the most relevant information to build arguments. For this you could use the 'zone of relevance' diagram where students place information in categories: irrelevant to this enquiry, quite relevant or very relevant. If you change the question you are considering, students will have to move the cards around the diagram, demonstrating that facts do not speak for themselves – we need to decide whether and how they are relevant to the questions we are considering.



D. Reflective tasks

10. Journalling to record personal thoughts / responses to aspects of a topic being studied. In one study students used journals to reflect on the contents of each lesson as they worked through a difficult topic, then the teacher ended the project with an opportunity for the students to read extracts from their journals to the class / small groups to share stories / perceptions. This also helps to reinforce the idea that everyone in the class is involved or affected by the issues in different ways.

11. Take a stand essays Teachers sometimes follow up a talking activity with a 'take a stand' essay, in which students explain their own take on the debate. Doing the writing at the end means students have not had to commit an opinion to paper until they have tested out a range of ideas and opinions. It also means that the classroom discussions can be more exploratory, with students exploring a variety of viewpoints, rather than sharing their own beliefs. But, at the end, they get a chance to say what they think, without running the risk of an open argument in the classroom.

E. Theatre, simulations and games

12. Simulated court case to develop empathy with a range of perspectives and consideration of the evidence.

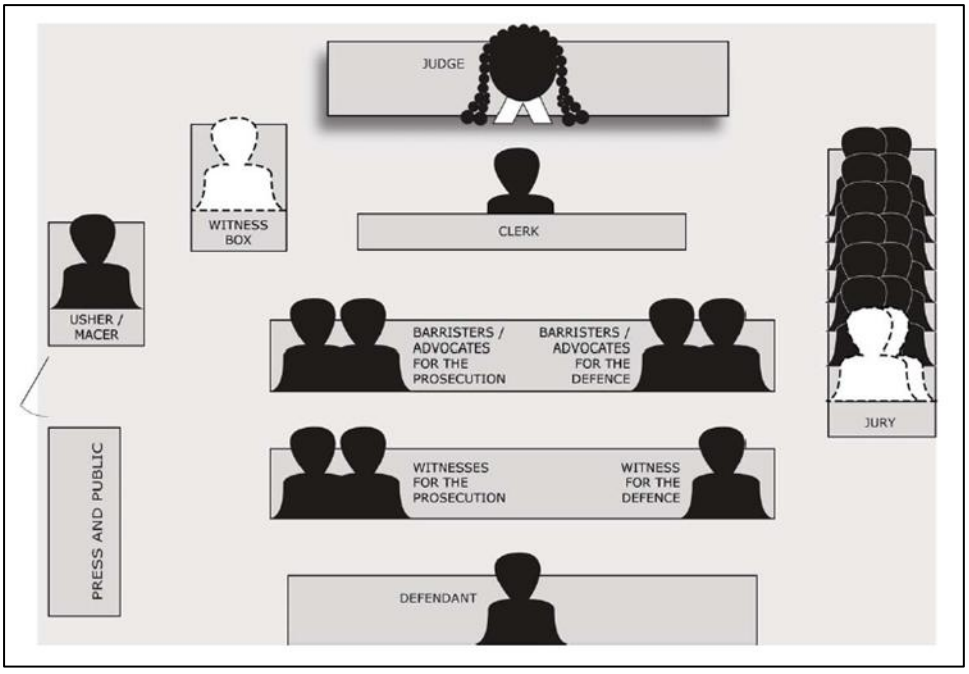
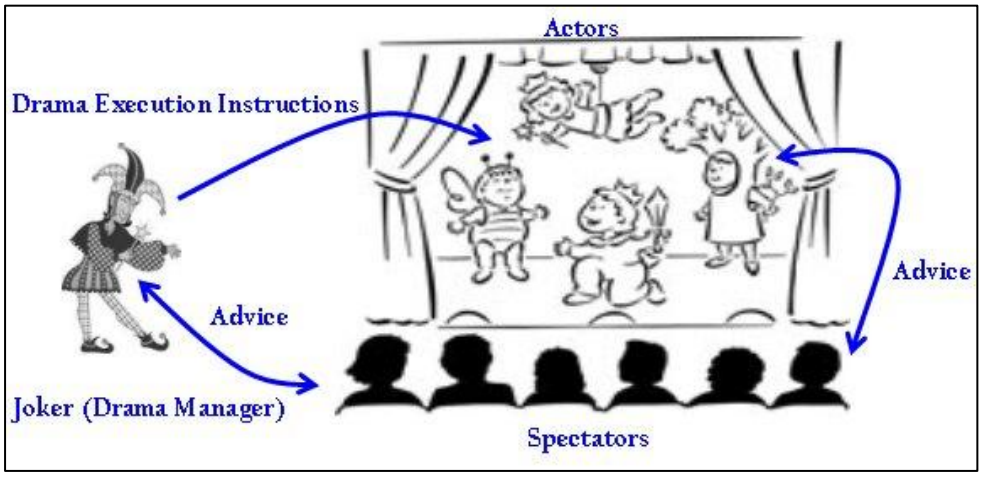


Image credit: Citizenship Foundation 2017

13. Forum theatre, where students can stop the action and take over a role. Sometimes the students research local experiences and incorporate these into their play. At other times the teacher may assume the role of 'joker' – the compere / facilitator who tries to provoke the audience members to reflect on, respond and intervene.



Source: Paracha., Jehanzeb & Yoshie (2009).

14. Virtual learning Some projects have designed virtual learning environments to present students with various simulated websites and social media forums, to help them think about how reliable they are and how they engage.

F. Comparative reasoning

15. You and your representatives Write down your own views on a public issue. Find out the relevant views of your elected representative (either through research or teacher presentation). Compare the two to identify similarities and differences and discuss the issues arising.

16. Checking search engine bias Conduct similar searches using different types of search engine. Compare the results to think about how our access to information is influenced by different providers.

G. Taking action

23. Write guidance for a group who may know less about a topic than you. For example, older relatives who are less knowledgeable about the internet, or younger children who are less knowledgeable about the news. This has worked well when students have learned about and practised media literacy. It's a good way to pass on new knowledge and skills.

24. Online action can be useful. Sometimes we see a discussion online and we're not sure what to do about it. The classroom can provide an opportunity to research an issue, think of alternative responses, and test out the best one with other students. Students could be provided with a list of possible responses to pick from e.g. post an argument,

make a joke, provide personal testimony, add links to other sites with different points of view, post articles with additional information, report illegal posts etc.

25. Joining a bigger campaign can also be useful. Many organisations are already campaigning on issues that we feel strongly about. Once we've researched them, developed our opinions and thought about the various organisations, we can provide support. This might be sending an email to encourage people, signing a petition, helping raise funds, passing on the information to friends and family, or helping out directly.

H. Case studies

17. Analysing a case Ask students to read a case study of a complex situation in a small group and, working through some prompt questions from the teacher, have a small group discussion about what people think and why. Devising structured talking frameworks for case studies can help students to become aware of the underlying conceptual issues, e.g. an argument between two people can be seen as a problem of competing human rights claims.

18. Empathetic cases Construct or find case studies that show how real people have been affected by divisive issues and conspiracy theories. This helps students think about how the world looks from others' perspectives.

19. Pre-bunking conspiracies Using real examples of conspiracy theories explore how they work, what their appeal is, what the fundamental problems are, how it affects people, and what political role it plays. This could be responding to issues students are already talking about or it could include current topics which are important but not widely known. This is sometimes called 'pre-bunking' – debunking the bad ideas before students encounter them.

20. Spotting strategies Teach strategies for (i) avoiding media mis/disinformation or (ii) spotting media stereotypes and then apply these strategies immediately to case studies from real life, to illustrate how these issues work in practice and give students experience of using the strategies. In some examples teachers have taught about different forms of hatred / different types of prejudice and then look for online examples. Students can then decide what to do to tackle these examples or, based on their experience, write some advice for others.

21. Rewriting and reframing rewriting media stories can be a powerful way to help students think about an issue more deeply, and can also help them to be more creative in how they themselves approach a topic. This can be done in a number of ways:

- Change media mode: Take a story written for one type of media publication (e.g. a scientific journal) and rewrite it for a tabloid or short blog or YouTube video. Compare the two stories to think about what works in different contexts and what this means for consumers of each type of media.
- Change point of view: This can also work if students take a story and rewrite it from another person's perspective. This could involve re-telling the story from another character's perspective, or from someone's perspective that was not represented in

the original. For example, a news story about people smuggling from the perspective of the police could be rewritten from the perspective of the person being smuggled, or even the parents of someone who left their home to seek opportunities overseas.

- Change the framing: Many stories can be retold through a specific conceptual lens, for example, we can reinterpret a news story as an example of human rights, or economic interdependence, or power.

22. Culturally relevant cases Sometimes we can consider serious issues through case studies that are better known to students. For example, teaching about racism and sex discrimination through a case study of football. This might help build relevance to young people or make the political problem seem more familiar or relevant. It can also help to make the discussion less personal.

I. Art and storytelling

25. Self-expression Students can express themselves through creating art. For example, one group created pictures / collages to show 'what it means to be a man today'. Another group attended a photo exhibition and produced their own photos in response to the exhibition. These photographs were also exhibited in a parallel exhibition. In another example, a young person made a film about their life, especially their religious beliefs.

27. Responding to art We can also use art as a stimulus to thinking and feeling. In one study, students used a set of photographs related to a topical issue as a stimulus to their thinking. For each photo they asked what was most / least representative of the campaign they were studying, or what was important about the image, or how they responded to it.

28. Counter-storytelling is an important action. Young people can be empowered through their own storytelling and through listening attentively and respectfully to others. This can both recognise diverse stories and help us learn from one another. In one example, students listened to a politicians' speech, then wrote about their own lives, experiences, and local knowledge. They used these stories to write a letter to the politician explaining what they agreed with and disagreed with and explaining how these positions were informed by their own lived experiences. This enabled them to share their knowledge in a political way.

Learning intentions

Whilst we might often assume that we know why it is important to teach about contemporary issues that are divisive and difficult, the literature showed that teachers and researchers often have very different purposes in mind when they embark on such projects. In this section we summarise the kinds of learning aims that were discussed in the literature.

We are using this to help us to think more clearly about the purpose of the activities we plan in the 4Cs project, and we hope it might also help teachers to review and improve their own planning, and especially to support non-specialist colleagues to teach with clarity.

A. Cognitive

- Improve factual knowledge related to an issue
- Understand how the social media and online media worlds work – who owns companies, how they make profit, our roles as consumers / users, how certain forms of information come our way (search engine biases, thought bubbles etc)
- Evaluate evidence for reliability and relevance
- Identify examples of scientific and pseudo-scientific reasoning (especially in relation to conspiracy theories)
- Use new information to correct misconceptions
- Understand how different people have different perspectives on the same issue / evidence
- Understand how we can evaluate different opinions and arguments (by reviewing the quality of their arguments, the relevance of their evidence, the political impact of their position)
- Understand why some issues are controversial and divisive
- Understand how issues can be framed by wider concepts (such as human rights, racial justice etc)
- Ability to synthesise various viewpoints to inform a better understanding or way forward
- Devise solutions to complex political problems and justify them with regard to multiple perspectives
- Learn how to build an argument
- Provide justifications for an argument, including evidence and reasoning
- Adapt an argument in the light of feedback and criticism
- Compare two or more examples or opinions to identify similarities and differences and use this to evaluate information and arguments
- Understand how media representations often build on established stereotypes and characters
- Understand the various forms of hate, and what this looks like (especially online)
- Know what variety of actions are open to you to tackle online hatred, disinformation or divisive arguments
- Understand how people's identities are influenced by intersectionality (e.g. race, class, religion, gender etc)

B. Skills

- Be able to justify and present your opinion (student voice)
- Ability to make a meaningful contribution to debates about divisive issues
- Ability to plan and undertake appropriate action (to pursue change or express solidarity)
- Ability to listen to others and respond – either by supporting, questioning or modifying positions
- Build ability to identify false or misleading information, especially online sources

C. Social

- Build trust between students
- Build trust with others
- Promote tolerance of people with different beliefs / values
- Build empathy with others
- Understand the power dynamics operating in a classroom – who speaks / is silenced?
- Motivation to intervene or act in a situation
- Generate hope as the starting point for confronting and solving problems

D. Self

- Understand your own identity
- Understand how your own identity affects how you respond to other people's views
- Maintain an open-mind and revisit opinions in the light of learning with others
- Reflect on how you respond to information online and the emotional reasons for your engagement / response
- Understand how our own emotions, beliefs and motivations influence how we deal with new information

E. Values

- Clarify the values you have that underpin your beliefs / arguments
- Develop a commitment to open-mindedness, especially when we don't know all the evidence
- Respect for truth
- Appreciation for others' stories / experiences

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