



DISCUSSING SENSITIVE TOPICS WITH STUDENTS

Pedagogical Guide





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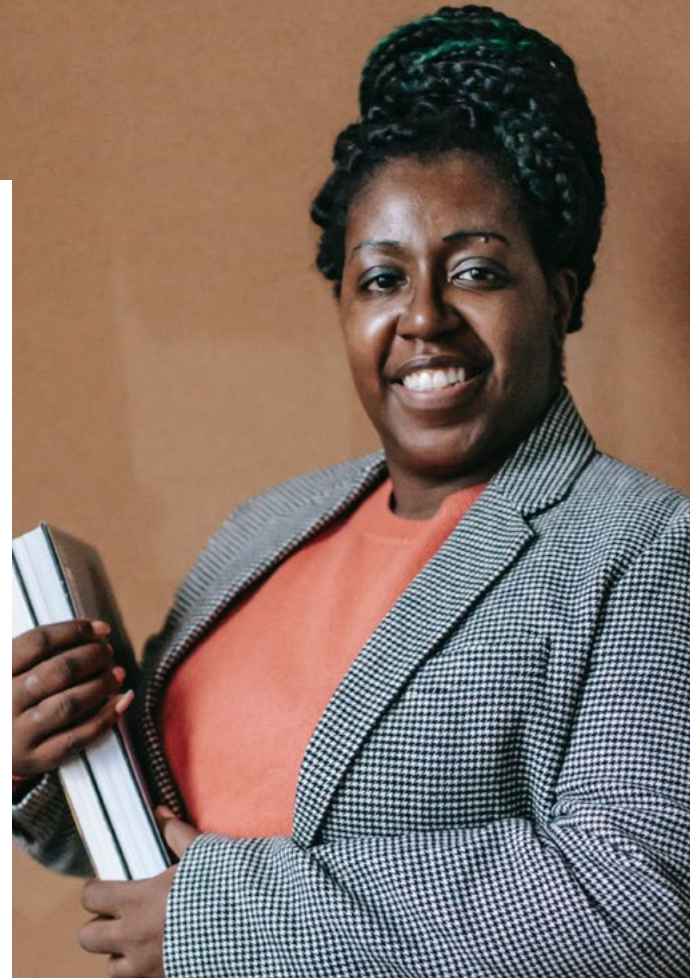
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FORE-WORD

Over the past few years, the issue of “sensitive” topics seems to have become a recurring and worrying concern for many teachers and school staff. Since school is a place of both education and socialization, it is not uncommon for topics that touch, upset, shock or anger us to come up unexpectedly. Sometimes the students bring them up; at other times, they are part of the prescribed curriculum. As educators, we sometimes wonder whether or not we should discuss certain sensitive issues with our students. When we need to, what exactly should we talk about? What position should we adopt? How do we ensure that we can accommodate the different points of view expressed? How can we avoid traps and pitfalls? What precautions should we take to prevent things from getting out of hand?

In 2015, to assist with reflection on this topic, the Centre d'intervention pédagogique en contexte de diversité, in collaboration with the Service des ressources éducatives and Sivane Hirsch, professor at Université Laval, produced a pedagogical guide on discussing sensitive topics. More recently, the same team revisited this guide to produce a new version in line with the latest research in the field. While this pedagogical guide is designed foremost for teachers, it is also intended for use by any member of the Centre de services scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys educational community when faced with these situations.



**ENJOY
YOUR
READING!**

Justine Gosselin-Gagné

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INTRO- DUCTION

Topics labelled “sensitive” are numerous and varied. At times, we may have the impression that “everything is sensitive,” whether it’s the content imposed by the education program or themes raised in various media and which students “bring” into the classroom. To better understand what makes a topic sensitive, we asked secondary school teachers to share their experiences in this regard as part of a research project (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022).

Based on their testimonies, we identified four dimensions around which sensitive topics seem to revolve. You can use these four dimensions as a lens to predict what could make a topic sensitive in the classroom. They can also guide you in preparing to address sensitive topics with your students or to teach them.

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS

ETHICAL DIMENSION

The topic draws on social representations and values (among students, their families and school staff).

PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSION

The topic is highly complex, calling on knowledge that often requires interdisciplinary treatment.

POLITICAL DIMENSION

The topic challenges the way we live in society and raises issues of power relations.

SOCIAL DIMENSION

The topic is evolving in a pluralistic context where consensus is not always possible (or even desirable).



EXAMPLE

Teaching about genocides is part of the history curriculum in Secondary 2 (the Holocaust) and Secondary 5 (concept of genocide). It is also part of the theme of “power relations” in the new Culture and Citizenship in Québec program in Secondary 5. Yet many teachers admit they prefer not to discuss this topic in class (Hirsch & Mc Andrew, 2016; Moisan, 2016).

The four dimensions help us to understand that the theme of genocide is sensitive because it:

- > brings us up against each other’s social representations and values when it comes to trying to understand “how this was possible”
- > forces us to consider the different realities and life experiences of the students in our class—for example, when some students come from communities that have been victims of genocide and others come from societies that have been responsible for genocide
- > raises questions of power relations through analysis of the racist ideology underlying each genocide
- > requires analysis of the political, social, economic and legal issues involved in order to understand it in all its complexity

ETHICAL
DIMENSION

SOCIAL
DIMENSION

POLITICAL
DIMENSION

PEDAGOGICAL
DIMENSION



EXAMPLE

Cultural appropriation can be broadly defined as “the borrowing, by a majority group, of a cultural element from a minority group, without acknowledging the borrowing or by demonstrating a lack of knowledge or misappropriation. The definition of majority and minority groups is based not only on a numerical relationship, but also on the role they play culturally, economically, politically and socially. Thus, the concept cannot be understood without considering the tensions raised by the balance of power between majority and minority social groups ‘in terms of power and agency’ (Lefrançois & Éthier, 2019, p.12)” (Piché & Hirsch, 2022) [Translation].

It is therefore a complex concept that is often referred to, by students and in the media, in contexts ranging from the analysis of works of art, to the choice of Halloween costumes, to the critique of plays and films.

The four dimensions help us to understand that the theme of cultural appropriation is sensitive because it:

- > brings teachers and students up against each other’s values (e.g. freedom of expression, openness to other cultures, respect, recognition)
- > reminds us of the challenges of living in a plural and democratic society, where cultures come together but must also make room for their own distinct expression
- > addresses, by definition, issues of power relationships within a society and, consequently, the way in which each person sees themselves within these relationships
- > is highly complex, may have repercussions on school life, and requires integrating various subjects into teaching

ETHICAL
DIMENSION

SOCIAL
DIMENSION

POLITICAL
DIMENSION

PEDAGOGICAL
DIMENSION

The four-step approach proposed in this guide—reflection, preparation, facilitation and debriefing—is based on the four dimensions of a sensitive theme. In other words, this definition will not only help you identify topics that are likely to become sensitive in the classroom, but also to tackle them a little more easily with your students.



RE- FLECTION

The first step of the process is to think about whether it's the right time and place to discuss a sensitive topic with your students and, if so, how to do it. This will depend first on the nature of the topic:

- > Is it in an integral part of the Québec Education Program?
- > Is it relevant to your students' lives, either in school or outside of school?
- > Is it in the news?

In all cases, it's important to make connections between the learning objectives and a facilitated discussion around the topic. Integrating this into your planning can be an opportunity to make your teaching more meaningful, authentic and motivating for your students.

Therefore, before deciding to tackle the topic in question, you should ask yourself the following questions:

A. WILL IT CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS' LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR COMPETENCIES?

Whether the sensitive topic is part of the education program or not, it's important to stay consistent with the various existing frameworks and school programs. To do so, you can draw on the competencies to be developed as well as the content suggested in each program.

As well, consider examining these topics from an interdisciplinary perspective. For example, addressing a sensitive topic linked to current events can be an opportunity for students to develop their critical thinking and analysis skills, to learn about historical or ethical aspects of the issue and, in this way, broaden their horizons and become more open to diversity.

B. WILL IT PROVIDE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES INHERENT IN THE DEBATE AROUND THIS SENSITIVE TOPIC?

To answer this question, you will have to first analyze the topic and identify what makes it sensitive. This will enable you to determine whether, despite the great complexity of these themes, you can bring your students—and yourself—to share their emotions and distinguish established facts from opinions, value judgments and beliefs surrounding all the ideas conveyed about these issues and the analyses made of them. Addressing the sensitive topic in class will provide an opportunity to explore all its facets, while considering its historical, scientific, environmental or other nature as well as the social and personal issues that emerge from it. Over and above the debate that a sensitive topic can provoke, and which the teacher or facilitator must be prepared to “steer” to prevent things from getting out of hand, students should be encouraged to take an informed look at and deepen their understanding of different aspects of the topic under study. This is how school plays its part.

C. WILL IT FOSTER THE EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS, IDEAS AND OPINIONS IN A RESPECTFUL CLIMATE?

- > Might you or some of your students be personally affected by this topic? Some individuals may be more immediately affected by a topic than others, depending on their reality, background and personal experience.
- > Is it a good time to have this discussion? Consider the social climate, which may be unfavourable when a topic is the subject of social debate, but which can also justify an educational intervention on your part.
- > Is the classroom climate conducive to discussing this topic? Make sure to know your group before broaching a sensitive topic. It's also important that the students know each other well enough to feel safe speaking up in class. Consider your group's classroom reality to make sure the timing is right for this discussion.

Your answers to these questions will enable you to adapt to your situation and create a “brave space” where everyone can express themselves and listen to other people's points of view.

We often talk about the importance of establishing a safe space in certain contexts, i.e. a space where everyone's well-being is assured. However, such an approach seems inconsistent with the very nature of sensitive topics, and is more likely to encourage school staff to avoid them. That's why it's more appropriate to create a respectful space where everyone's sensitivities are recognized, but where each individual is willing to question their own views and explore new ideas. We call this a “brave space.”

(Arao & Clemens, 2013)

It may be that, following this reflection, you decide not to go any further in discussing a sensitive topic. If the topic was raised by your students, take the time to clearly explain the reasons for your decision—because the issue is unlikely to go away on its own.

Otherwise, it's preparation time! This is the subject of the next section.



PRE- PARATION

Now that you have decided to address a sensitive topic with your students, determine when you will do so, making sure to give yourself enough time to prepare. **Do not improvise!**

Naturally, when the topic is part of the curriculum, it is easier to plan ahead. But when students bring up a subject on their own, don't immediately interrupt your lesson plan. Let them "vent" for a few minutes, then explain that you will discuss the subject at a more appropriate time because you don't want to treat it lightly. Use the opportunity to become familiar with the debate surrounding the topic so that you can better anticipate your students' potential reactions and gauge the scope of the work involved.

The following three steps will help you structure your preparation:

A. IDENTIFY WHERE YOU STAND ON THE ISSUE, AND TRY TO IDENTIFY THE POSITION OF YOUR STUDENTS

This step is related to the ethical dimension. It is a reminder that sensitive topics directly involve our social representations and values, as well as those of the students, and therefore arouse particular emotions and certainties that are difficult to debate. The various ideas we may have about different cultures, religions, beliefs or values, as well as fears, feelings of anger or misconceptions, can all influence the way we look at an issue. It is therefore important to identify your own position before trying to identify those of your students (while recognizing that they may be highly diverse, in keeping with the social dimension of sensitive themes). Being aware of your own position on the sensitive topic beforehand will enable you to lead the discussion in a "professional" way, regardless of the stance you choose to adopt. (See next page for the different types of professional stances.)



PROFESSIONAL STANCE

“Professional stance” is a term used to describe the way in which the teacher presents the object of study in the classroom. Based on the work of Hess (2004) and Kelly (1986), we have identified four stances.

The first considers knowledge to be “objective” and, therefore, leaves no room for controversy in teaching. The second favours certain social values, such as those promoted by Québec schools (e.g. protecting the environment; “positive” sexuality). Since these two stances leave no room for a plurality of points of view, they are less appropriate for tackling topics whose sensitivity can be explained, among other things, by the plural context of democratic societies (social dimension). They run the risk of stirring up tensions around the power relations inherent in these topics (political dimension) and of putting students up against the ethical dimension by recognizing only certain values and certain social representations.

The other two stances are better adapted to our context. One proposes allowing students to express their point of view, without engaging in debate. The other takes this logic a step further, inviting the teacher to express their own point of view in a positive way (and without denigrating others) to set the example and the desirable tone for class discussion, during which all points of view remain legitimate. These two stances help to establish a balance for presenting the object of study in the classroom.



B. DO YOUR RESEARCH

This step is part of the pedagogical dimension of sensitive topics. Because these topics tend to be quite complex, they often involve different types of knowledge from multiple disciplines. While you don't need to be an expert to discuss them with your students, it's important to be aware of the different arguments that are driving the debate and that are likely to emerge during the exchanges. These reference points will help you prepare your intervention and integrate it into program-related learning. The interdisciplinary approach is often a winning strategy in these contexts, allowing more facets of the topic to be explored.

C. MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH THE CONTENT COVERED IN CLASS

Students recognize the importance and relevance of learning when they can see how it affects their actions as a citizen in society. Addressing the various ways of seeing the world that emerge around a topic and making the link with a current debate—part of the political dimension—can enrich the discussion and make it more meaningful to students.



FACILITATION


Because a sensitive topic often arouses strong emotions in students (ethical dimension) in a context of diversity (social dimension) and different ways of seeing the world (political dimension), it risks leading to heated outbursts, while motivating students to engage in the exchange. Without dismissing the emotions generated by the discussion, it's important to maintain a critical distance in order to move past them. For this reason, before tackling a sensitive topic in the classroom, you'll need to structure the activity so that students will be able to express themselves on the subject.

Here are a few guidelines to help ensure a good classroom climate and a brave space for discussion:

A. SET GROUND RULES WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Here are a few rules that seem essential:

- > Invite students to organize their thoughts before speaking, for example by jotting down the ideas that come to mind as they listen to others (which will also help them wait for their turn to speak). This will encourage them to name and explore their emotions and to consider the subject more carefully. You can emphasize that their emotions are legitimate and can be expressed, but that they do not necessarily make the students right.
- > Ban the use of sophisms (logical fallacies), which people often resort to when they are short of arguments and want to win points easily. Some common examples: the personal attack ("you don't understand because you're not from here"), the slippery slope ("if we accept this, next time will be worse"), the abusive generalization ("anyone who doesn't get vaccinated is a conspiracy theorist"), the bandwagon ("everyone knows that . . .") or the appeal to authority ("my father says that . . ."). If necessary, remind your students that these are not valid arguments and should be avoided.



Sophisms are argumentation devices that can get in the way of dialogue. They are invalid arguments that merely express our preconceptions and emotions. We need to be aware of this and be very careful not to fall into this trap, as they often seem to "make sense" or appear "logical" and therefore acceptable.

- > Let the students converse, insisting as much on respectful, intentional listening (what can I learn from the comment?) and openness to the other person's message (even if I disagree) as on expressing ideas without trying to impose an opinion. These are essential skills which the discussion will help students to develop.
- > Finally, remember that the usual rules of classroom management also apply to discussing sensitive topics. For example, formulate clear instructions, show your students that you are listening, and guide them in their thinking.

PREJUDICES AND STEREOTYPES

Prejudices and stereotypes are preconceived ideas, preconceptions, that we hold about various aspects of our reality. Whereas stereotypes are images that we have of a reality (for example, when talking about Muslim women, we might think of a woman wearing a hijab), prejudices are value judgments ("women who wear the Muslim veil are subservient to male authority").

DECENTRATION, BETWEEN RELATIVISM AND ETHNOCENTRISM

Relativism proposes observing the world from different points of view, and not just through the prism of our own culture. This does not mean that all ideas are equal (sometimes called "absolute relativism"), but rather that it's important to understand the context in which an idea, value, practice or ritual is developed, and the meaning attributed to it by those who share it. Neglecting to do so becomes ethnocentrism, i.e. looking at the world solely through the prism of our own culture.

WE THEREFORE NEED TO NAVIGATE BETWEEN THESE TWO POLES TO ENABLE STUDENTS TO MOVE AWAY FROM THEIR OWN POINT OF VIEW: GETTING TO KNOW THEMSELVES WHILE MAKING ROOM FOR OTHERS AND THEIR IDEAS.

B. MAINTAIN A CRITICAL DISTANCE

It's always important to pay attention to how you teach a particular subject and how you position yourself in relation to it: this is your "professional stance." You should always start a discussion having a viewpoint and a few ideas on the topic. However, to gain a deeper understanding of the issues involved, it is essential to take a step back, away from any preconceptions or prejudices, and to examine the topic from a variety of perspectives, before determining your own point of view.

As a teacher or other educator, you not only have to do this yourself, but you must also guide your students through this process. Consider bringing various educational resources into the classroom to offer other points of view that students may encounter. This is also a good way of depersonalizing the debate for your students, as they'll realize that their different positions on the sensitive topic can also be found in society.

C. GO BACK TO BASICS AND PROBLEMATIZE

Going back to the basics, synthesizing knowledge about the object of study and adopting a critical perspective in your analysis will enable you to support class discussion. By choosing the angle from which to approach the topic, you can turn it into a problem to be studied. For example, you can ask students to:

- > Describe the issue by answering questions such as: What? Who? When? How?
- > Define key concepts for analysis
- > Contextualize the issue by considering historical, social and political aspects
- > Analyze the factors that explain it



EXAMPLE

The question raised by vaccines in general, and by the COVID-19 vaccine in particular, is a good example. When students were experiencing the pandemic and its effects on their daily lives, the issue of vaccines became highly personal and, as a result, led to strong emotional reactions. Talking about it at school provides an opportunity to frame the debate. But how? To move beyond the pro- and anti-vaccine debate, you can:

- > Start by **describing** the context of COVID-19 and lockdown
- > **Situate** the issues raised during the development and manufacture of the vaccines within a larger debate about vaccines
- > **Define** difficult concepts, such as “conspiracy,” and contextualize them using specific examples
- > **Analyze** the factors behind people’s reactions to compulsory vaccination, and recognize the legitimacy of various possible arguments



EXAMPLE



The right to abortion is another interesting example. Instead of the traditional debate where people are “for” or “against” abortion, the question can be approached from a different angle, such as: “Does the question of ‘the right to abortion’ still have a legitimate place in society today?”

Framed in this way, the question invites students to:

- > **Discuss** the history of the debate
- > **Describe** the different points of view
- > **Analyze** the power relationships underlying these points of view

Whether on your own or as a team, adopting an interdisciplinary approach will enable you to consider all these aspects of the pedagogical dimension. When possible, sharing the task will not only lighten the load but allow you to benefit from the viewpoint of another “expert” on the subject, which will help you maintain the critical distance that is so essential to teaching. Each discipline brings a different perspective to the issue, allowing us to analyze it in a different way as we draw on a different set of concepts and tools.

D. MAKE ROOM FOR A DIVERSITY OF VIEWPOINTS AND EMOTIONS

In keeping with the social dimension of sensitive topics, it’s important to allow students to express themselves and to show them that their ideas and emotions are respected, even if they don’t always reflect your perception of Québec society’s values.

Allowing for diverse perspectives on the issue doesn’t mean that anything goes, but rather that no one has a monopoly on the right answers, and that each person is allowed to talk about different experiences.

As mentioned earlier, emotions should not guide the reflection, but they can be a starting point for it. For instance, you can invite students to describe and try to understand their emotions, as well as the reactions they may provoke in those around them. This analysis will help them move beyond their emotions and take a more critical look at the issue.

DE- BRIEFING



After studying a sensitive topic with your students, set aside some time for them to reflect on what they've learned. This will help them to derive maximum benefit from the exchange.

There may be two types of learning: knowledge about the topic studied, and skills associated with other competencies in the Québec Education Program.

A. REVIEW THE TOPIC ADDRESSED

Begin the debriefing by first recalling your pedagogical objectives—the reasons why you decided to address this topic—then the emotions it provoked (naming them) and the notions used to analyze it. The aim is not to reach a consensus, but rather to leave room for different positions. This synthesis helps to defuse the subject of its sensitivity, to calm the debate or, at least, to contain it.

B. CLEARLY DESCRIBE THE APPROACH USED

Point out to students the skills they developed in the process by approaching the issue as a problem and maintaining a critical distance: being open to other people's points of view, developing their own point of view, deconstructing ideas received, expressing their own opinion while respecting others, etc.

Take this opportunity to remind students of the "ground rules" followed so that they can transfer this skill to other contexts.

This summary will help students identify the general knowledge and skills they learned through this classroom experience, enhancing their personal development but also distancing themselves from the emotions felt during the discussion. The experience can also serve as a model for discussing other sensitive topics, whether in class, elsewhere in the school or even outside school.

C. ADOPT A REFLECTIVE ATTITUDE

Recall the steps taken and the difficulties encountered. This will enable students to recognize themselves in this process, and to understand that it's a normal one. Students will be relieved to see that everyone can have strong emotions that need to be managed in a debate or to critically analyze a situation, and that everyone has prejudices that they need to recognize and overcome.

You can develop this reflective attitude through a simple discussion, or structure it by looking back at each step in the learning process. Support your students' reflection by asking them to remember their initial emotions, what they knew at the start and what they learned, what surprised them and what reassured them. You may want to ask students to keep a journal so as to have a written record of their work. And it can be a handy tool for you, too!

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