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Welcome to a Teaching Controversial Issues video. I am Angelos Vallianatos, a Council of Europe and European Wergeland Centre expert, a teacher trainer

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There are three things that we are going to deal with today:

Main rules of working with Teaching Controversial Issues in the classroom,

How to create a safe environment for all

and some practical tips from a teacher.

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We don't usually deal with controversial issues in the classroom because it usually arouses strong feelings and divide communities and society, so we don't feel at ease to bring such issues in the classroom. But is this the real issue? Issues that create controversy are already there, in the classroom and we usually don't deal with it, so this is a problem.

What controversy is there in the classroom? there are two kinds of it:

The endogenous, what already exists in the classroom, the controversy that we have everyday teaching practice and the exogenous the things that come from outside, that happen outside and echo in the classroom, as students bring them along.

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It was a nice morning, I was feeling well, I had to teach my favorite issue, I had done everything, I was prepared, I had studied, I had my material, so I was in a very good mood. They would love it.

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And then I went to the classroom, I started teaching and I preached -sorry, I taught everything, I used my material, I said almost everything, I loved it.

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But they didn't follow. They were silent, but I couldn't drag them, motivate them, move them. What can I do? I started a who is who.

Who am I? I am a scientist, an adult, a professional teacher, a learning facilitator.

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What are they? If I could read their minds, they are on the way. they are interested in their personal image and style, in their music, in their social media avatar, in their social life online or face to face, exploring their selves and the others.

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What are the things that they carry with them when they are in the class?

What they carry is an image of their present and the future, what they are now, how they think of themselves, what they would like to be, what are their dreams.

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The second thing among others, is that they have different ways of learning, different taste of learning, different methods that they like or are sufficient in their learning.

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And the third thing that they carry with them is their culture, the hierarchy in the society, what is the meaning of terminology.

And those things I can't see and I cannot take into consideration.

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A sociogram is needed. Do I have a sociogram? Can I make one? Usually not. What can I do?

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I can go out of the classroom and observe during the breaks. Isn't it fascinating that students are totally different during the breaks? Some are very active, some are not, they are dealing with different things, they come back in the class and they have red cheeks which they usually lose during the lessons. So, to observe, to see what happens, who is who there. And then use this information and discuss it with my colleagues and find out if I am right about my observation. And third, to change my teaching methods so that they can reveal themselves, so I know better who they are and do what they want.

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But this means that in the classroom I have all those different opinions, all the controversies, they don't have same things to say and maybe they don't say it the same way. What can I do? How can I manage this? How can everyone feel safe and respected in order not only to reveal their opinions but also to know how to cope with it and with the others? How can the students reflect, argue, express, experiment, explore, negotiate and finally learn? If I want my students to be able to express without consequences, there are rules. Let's set rules that allows us to do that in the classroom. This doesn't mean that I bring in the classroom some rules that already exist, but follow a whole process about it. The rules have to be written and signed by everyone, but there is a process of discussing, of finding, of creating these rules together. This means that we, the teachers, discuss about the rules that give our students the possibility to express themselves, be active, be respected. And then the students discuss about it. Then we come to conclusions and then we merge those conclusions and the final product is the outcome of a democratic process where the one is learning from the other. And this is how we deal with this controversy.

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But what happens with the exogenous controversy? What happens when something happens when I have my lesson but the students have another issue in their minds and this is hot for them? What can I do?

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Usually I am afraid that I cannot cope with hot issues, with different opinions, I cannot cope with expressing myself, should I express myself or not? Because controversial issues arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society, mostly in my classroom. I have the rules that allow me to bring every information in the classroom because my aim is not that my students learn my opinion, but I want them to learn how to cope with all information around them. How to critically approach something. So, there may be a hot issue there, but are there ways to deal with it?

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The rules give me the possibility to let my students express themselves in ways that that are their ways. But then, if I bring the hot instance in the classroom, if I don't deal with the hot issue itself, but create a distance, then I work by a method of teaching, by a way that I introduce something, everybody gets informed, every information about different ideas and suggestions is expressed, and then we can find a way to cope with it and manage controversy.

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I am the one, the teacher, who can conduct all of it because I can put it in an order, in order not to avoid controversial issues, but use them in a way and by a method that they can be a part of learning.

For example

Math is not only numbers, but it is the fundamental method of dealing with things. Physics is a lens to see the world and how to deal with the world in a democratic way. Religion is not only about us and them, but is a way to understand the terminology, the way, the feeling, the everyday life of other people in our society. History is almost also a way to see the present through the past, because nothing unique has happened to us, it all has happened before. Physical education is a way to see my body, to see the beauty, it is a way to decode Next Top Model that students are fans of. Language means ways to express myself, to form my ideas in words, and on the other hand, to learn how to argue, how to participate in social media, how not to just hate speeching the others. And Literature, how to approach the big democratic ideas through books, arts, different kinds of expression.

Because who am I? I am a scientist, an adult, a professional in teaching, I am a learning facilitator, and I want my students to see the world through my science magic and become active, participative democratic citizens.

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Finally, the practical advice from a teacher:

Let's not avoid dealing with controversial issues in the classroom. Let's deal with them in a methodological way. Let's use controversy as a way of teaching, and involve controversy in letting our students deal with it. This will make our lessons more interesting for all, for our students, but also for us.

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Thank you