

adapted from VU Amsterdam, Center for Teaching and Learning

## Introduction

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a complex and sensitive issue that often elicits strong emotions and opinions. As educators, it is essential to approach this topic with care and empathy. It is also important to foster an environment where students feel safe. Before delving into this subject with your students, it could be helpful to think about your own ideas and perspective in relation to this situation.

It is also possible that you might be confronted with emerging discussions at unplanned moments. As you cannot always prevent such events from happening, it is advisable to reflect on possible modes of action beforehand. Hopefully, this guideline will help you prepare for the possibility of these moments in your classroom.

### Safety first

The safety of everyone involved should be the top priority. If you believe that there is a risk of physical harm, remove yourself from the situation,

**and immediately call the security control room (030) 253 13 00.**

**In case of an emergency call (030) 253 44 44 for help.**

### Support

Utrecht University is committed to supporting everyone who is directly or indirectly affected by these events. We offer our students and employees support in this regard. If you are a student and are looking for information, advice or guidance, check the page [Who to contact?](#) to see who you can contact. Employees who are concerned can seek support from their manager and [Staff Welfare Service](#) (intranet, login required).

## Step 1: Self-awareness

Your self-awareness can greatly impact your engagement with this topic in your classroom and create an atmosphere where students feel safe to explore this challenging issue. You can use the questions below for individual reflection, as well as to guide a meeting with colleagues.

### Reflection questions:

- Am I prepared and willing to facilitate a dialogue?
- What perspectives and experiences shape how I view the Israel-Palestine conflict

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- Where did I first hear about it, and how did this initial exposure shape my perception?
- How do I feel when I hear about this conflict now, and what are the reasons for these emotions?
- How might my emotional response to this conflict differ from my students' emotional responses?
- How might my feelings about the conflict affect my students' experiences in my class?
- How might my students' own identities and life experiences shape how they encounter this conflict?
- How can I create a safe and inclusive space in the classroom when engaging with the topic of the Israel-Palestine conflict?
- What do I need as a teacher to make these situations safe for myself?

After thinking about the reflection questions, it is possible that you don't feel comfortable with engaging in a dialogue in the classroom, or you do not feel adequately prepared to talk about it. In that case, make sure you are clear about it and you state boundaries. You could offer a different time/place for students to talk about the situation. If you do want to discuss this subject during a following class, you could ask a colleague to help you with this. In some faculties, central discussions are organised. You can also refer your students to those discussions.

## Step 2: Choose your scenario

Based on your reflection on yourself, and the learning environment you want to create for your students, determine which of the three scenarios fits best.

### 1. Scenario 'Deescalate'

Choose this scenario if the classroom atmosphere is not conducive, or if you want to deescalate a situation.

### 2. Scenario 'Make room for emotions'

Choose this if the discussion is inevitable.

### 3. Scenario 'Create an open dialogue'

Choose this if you feel comfortable facilitating this dialogue and see the possibility of a positive learning outcome.

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## 1. Scenario 'Deescalate'

If the classroom atmosphere is not conducive to it at that moment, deescalate the situation. This refers to a situation where emotions run high and tensions escalate. Deescalating is a crucial skill for teachers to maintain a productive and safe learning environment. Below you can read some strategies to help you effectively handle such a situation.

- **Stay calm**  
As a teacher, you set the tone for the classroom. If you remain calm and composed, it can help deescalate the situation.
- **Acknowledge feelings**  
Recognize and validate the emotions of the individuals involved. Let them know you understand that they are upset or frustrated.
- **Empathize**  
Show empathy and understanding towards the students' perspectives and feelings, even if you don't necessarily agree with them. It is important to note that empathy for one perspective does not automatically mean a dismissal of another perspective. It can be necessary to make this explicit.
- **Take a pause**  
Suggest taking a break from the discussion if it's becoming too intense. This break can provide a chance for emotions to cool down and allow everyone to collect their thoughts. It can help to instruct students to not continue the discussion outside the classroom.
- **Follow up**  
After class, follow up with individual students involved in the discussion. You can check on their well-being, and further discuss the incident if needed. See the yellow frame on page 1.

## 2. Scenario 'Make room for emotions'

Sometimes it can be difficult to deescalate a discussion in the classroom, or you might feel that it is your role as a teacher to make room for emotions. Recognize that during times of conflict, students may need emotional support more than educational opportunities.

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In this scenario, you do not delve into the dialogue about different perspectives, and into understanding the situation. You create a safe environment so students can safely acknowledge the emotions they may be experiencing. Below you can find some tips on how to create a safe environment in the classroom.

- **Co-create guidelines for interaction**  
Students have different ways of expressing their emotions. It can help to first facilitate a dialogue about how sharing your emotions can be helpful and constructive. Questions like “What do you need to feel safe when sharing your emotions?” or “How can we respectfully disagree with each other?” can be useful.
- **Foster active listening**  
Emphasize the importance of truly listening and understanding each other. Foster an environment where students feel free to express themselves without fear of judgement or criticism, and discourage interruptions.
- **Encourage empathy**  
Encourage students to consider feelings and experiences of others, and to respond with kindness, acceptance and understanding, even when perspectives differ from their own. Foster an inclusive and respectful environment where empathy is valued and embraced as an essential aspect of communication and mutual understanding.
- **Adapt the pace and intensity**  
Try to recognize when emotions escalate and become overwhelming and adjust the pace or intensity of the activity as necessary. For example, implement a “Five-minute rule”, where each student can express their view in a respectful manner. You could also offer a short break for students to write about, and reflect on, their emotions, enabling them to regulate their feelings.
- **Follow up and check-in**  
Encourage students to reflect on the impact of the experience on themselves, as well as the group. Provide an individual or group follow up, and inquire about the well-being of students. Offer the opportunity for further discussion or support if needed. See the yellow frame on page 1.

### 3. Scenario ‘Create an open dialogue’

If you feel capable of creating an open and safe environment, consider starting an open dialogue. Below we provide some steps that can help with starting an open dialogue.

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*“The object of dialogue is not to analyse things, win an argument, or exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions – to listen to everybody’s opinions, suspend them, and to see what all that means.” (Bohm, 1996)*

## - **Step 1: Prepare**

To facilitate a constructive dialogue, it is crucial to have a basic understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict, including its history, key events, the parties involved, the language used, and the main arguments presented by each side. [Here](#) you can find information about the conflict. Be prepared for moments of discomfort, as these discussions can be challenging.

## - **Step 2: Discussion vs. Dialogue (see attachment)**

Explain the fundamental differences between a discussion (debate or argument) and a dialogue (open, empathetic conversation). Emphasize the value of suspending personal opinions to explore diverse perspectives.

## - **Step 3: Co-create guidelines for interaction**

As students have different ways of expressing their perspectives, it can be helpful to first facilitate a dialogue about how sharing can be helpful and constructive. You can use the above-mentioned questions like “What do you need to safely share your perspective?” or “How will we disagree with each other?”. It can also be good to set boundaries, such as how long the conversation is going to take, who leads the conversation and what will be discussed. You can also talk about consequences for not following the stated rules.

## - **Step 4: Engage in dialogue**

Pose open-ended questions that promote critical thinking and invite different perspectives. Examples of these questions include:

- How has your own thinking evolved around this issue?
- What question do we need to ask that has not been asked yet?
- What do you think is missing from the conversation?
- Words are powerful; Who do you admire for the way they have spoken about the conflict, and why?
- What is the role of the university in this conflict?

## - **Step 5: Closing the dialogue and follow up**

Encourage students to reflect on the impact of the experience on themselves as well as the group. Provide individual or group follow up and inquire about the well-being of students. If needed, you can offer the opportunity for further discussion or support. See the yellow frame on page 1.

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## Attachment 1

### Differences between discussion/debate and dialogue

	<b>DISCUSSION/DEBATE</b>	<b>DIALOGUE</b>
<b>STARTING POINT IS</b>	Looking for 'the best answer', or that which is morally 'right'.	Reality, which is morally right is not fixed and multi-interpretable.
<b>BASIC ATTITUDE IS</b>	Wanting to convince the other person from one's own judgement or knowledge.	From a free attitude the issue is investigated. We have something to say to each other.
<b>ABOUT THE CONVERSATION</b>	Participants demand speaking time, and see the other person's speaking time and insight/knowledge as incorrect.	Explore judgements through sincere questions. The conversation is characterized by examining and testing the different points of view.
<b>THE LANGUAGE USED IS CHARACTERIZED BY</b>	'Yes, but....'	'Yes, and...!', asking (probing) questions, accurately formulating and monitoring the process (For instance by summarizing each other).
<b>THE PROCESS IS CHARACTERIZED BY</b>	Momentum, acceleration, and conclusions/solutions.	Active listening, desires and answers that are evaluated.
<b>FOCUS ON</b>	Objective/effective knowing, decisions, conclusions and judgments.	levels of inference; attention is focused on 'relative knowing'. There is room for not knowing and new questions.