

Discussing the shooting incident in Utrecht on Monday March 18th



Utrecht University

On Monday morning March 18th a shooting incident occurred around 10:45 am at the 24 Oktoberplein in Utrecht, The Netherlands. Four people were killed, four were injured. There was at least one perpetrator who was taken into custody early that same evening. At the time of writing this letter, the motive was still unclear, but a terrorist motive was not yet ruled out and has since been used by the public prosecutor in the indictment (in the indictment, made public on 19 March, a complex of motives and charges is mentioned, including the terrorist motive). The threat level in Utrecht was therefore raised during the day to level 5, the highest level in The Netherlands (and scaled back later that evening, after the shooter had been apprehended).

This document provides strategies to discuss the shooting incident in an educational context. First, it elaborates on why incidents like this are difficult and challenging to teach and to discuss in the classroom. Next, do's and don'ts are considered for discussing and teaching such a sensitive topic. Finally, a lesson plan is presented on the base of which teachers can guide and encourage a discussion of the incident among students.

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I. How to discuss controversial topics in the classroom?

The shooting incident had clear consequences: people were killed and the measures taken by the police affected the whole town. Children and young people were affected as well, since all schools and many public spaces were on a lockdown. This can evoke strong emotional reactions and fear for terrorism among students, which makes discussions of the incident all the more challenging and sensitive. As a teacher you might be precarious about how to approach such a discussion, especially since not yet all the facts about what happened are known. In discussions it can prove difficult to find the right balance between toleration, on the one hand, and defining boundaries to what can be said, on the other.

In order to stimulate a constructive discussion it is important that you, as a teacher, first investigate your own views. You can do this by asking yourself the following questions:

- What is my own opinion on the incident?
- To what extent am I going to share this opinions with my students?
- Which emotions affect me when it comes to this subject?
- How can I regulate these emotions during the discussion?
- What do I know about the different perspectives on the subject?
- Which different perspectives are present among my students?
- How do I make sure that I am open to, and involved with, the experiences of my students?

It is important to keep in mind why the incident in Utrecht is a controversial topic. There are multiple opinions, points of view, and explanations regarding the incident, and these can differ among students, or between students and yourself. Try not to focus on these oppositions, but try to listen to each other, respect each other without judging. If you succeed in doing so, you can look for similarities and shared principles that may connect students' experiences and thoughts.

Your role as a teacher

- Facilitate a constructive conversation in class and let the students discuss the incident with one another. Your task is to guide the conversation in the right direction
- Find out if more information is needed in order to have a constructive conversation
- Listen to students and try to discern any underlying concerns
- Define limits to opinions as soon as they turn into undesirable expressions, i.e. if statements are (unknowingly) offending or insulting
- Position yourself as a teacher, not as an authority
- Encourage the whole class to take part in the conversation

Tips when having a conversation

- Emphasize why discussing the shooting incident is important (e.g. getting a grip on what happened, learning from each other's perspectives)
- Offer room for multiple opinions and points of view
- Consider the viewpoint and the language level of the students during the conversation
- Question controversial points of view by positioning students as experts, i.e. let the students question themselves and each other, let them investigate and reflect on their own thoughts and opinions
- Don't get personal when dealing with impetuous statements, but focus on the content of these statements
- Correct factual inaccuracies if they play an important role in the discussion
- Try to give room to all points of view in order to increase inclusiveness

- Explain why multiple perspectives and worldviews can exist alongside one another: depending on one's perspective it may look different

II. Do's and don'ts when discussing acts of violence such as terrorism

Do's

- Facts

The discussion will benefit from having the facts on the table. Try to read up on the facts beforehand. Pay attention to objectivity during the lesson and try to distinguish between opinions and facts. Ask where students obtained their information and try to stimulate critical reflection. If possible, try to offer a framework for factuality: for instance by referring to other acts of violence in the past, earlier (successful) attempts to arrest terrorists or shooters and disarming militant groups. A factual framework can also encompass performances of police forces and the Ministry of Justice and Security: point out that thousands of people in The Netherlands are working on keeping the country safe, and that, when it comes to shooting incidents, Special Forces report on location within ten minutes.

- Calmness and comfort

A calm teacher transmits order to the rest of the class. Teachers have emotions and opinions, just like everyone else, especially in times of crisis. Be aware of these and try not to be led by them. Substantive knowledge can offer comfort and can avert unexpected questions from the class. Calmness and comfort can also be apparent in allowing multiple answers to exist alongside one another.

- Dealing with uncertainty

Don't speculate if it is not yet clear how the violent act is motivated. First wait for more information. If multiple explanations circulate in the public discourse, put them alongside one another; there is no need to choose between them.

- Give room for multi-causality (multiple causes), avoid one-sidedness

An incident can have multiple causes, perpetrators can have multiple motives, and it's possible that multiple incidents occur at the same time (without apparent connection). It is helpful to withhold students from clinging on to monocausal, and often simplistic and polarising explanations. You can also stress the duality of the situation: someone can be confused, angry and a terrorist at the same time. The perpetrator can be a criminal, but also someone who aims to give meaning to his/her life through a religious or political act of violence.

Avoid one-sided transfer of knowledge. Draw up clear limits to what can and cannot be said during a discussion (discrimination, deliberate insults, and generalizations). It is important to question assumptions, try to get to the core of the discussion. Be aware that a one-sided discussion of violent acts can prompt polarization between groups of students.

- Give students the floor and provide room for emotions

Create a space in which students can express their emotions, positive as well as negative. Discussing the factual background of incidents before having a conversation about opinions and emotions, in relation to the facts, can help to maintain order. If you don't provide room for emotions in the classroom, they will be expressed somewhere else.

- When fear takes hold

Although it is still unclear what exactly happened, a terrorist motive has been established, and was mentioned from the very beginning. Therefore, there is a fair and justified chance that students associate the incident with terrorism. Show them which measures are already at work to stop terrorism and political violence (see the substantive article on 'counterterrorism' on TerInfo). Emphasize the values that terrorists try to undermine (democratic order, trust, and solidarity). Use historical frameworks; terrorism comes and goes in waves. Democratic constitutional states have faced these problems before and know how to deal with them; they won't perish.

- Offer an action perspective

Emphasize what students themselves can do against violence (maintain democratic values, don't polarize, respect each other, learn from each other's points of view, make sure you are well informed and don't spread one-sided information, stand up against one-sided reporting, etc.).

- Media and social media

Refine and add nuance to the information that students come across via the media and social media. Try to stick to the facts, emphasize that not all media coverage is based on facts. Try to keep in mind that students are confronted with a large amount of information on social media, often containing horrific images. If a student indicates having 'come across something on Facebook or other social media', explain not everything on there is true. Ask students if they have consulted multiple sources. Provide them with reliable sources from which they might get their information, like NOS.nl.

- Put stereotypes into perspective, e.g. the association between Islam and terrorism, or other binary or simplified explanations

If students associate the incident with terrorism and stereotypes about Islam: show them that not all terrorists are Muslim (see for instance the terrorist attack in New Zealand) and that not all Muslims are terrorists (see the articles on multiple terrorists and terrorist attacks that have different backgrounds). Emphasize how generalizing the association between Islam and violence is reprehensible. The same goes for other ideologies. Also emphasize on jihadism being too often linked to religious or ideological motives, whereas this is almost never the case with shooting incidents that have a white perpetrator, which are often classified as 'confused' men.

Don'ts

- Don't show horrific images or simplifications of the problem

Be aware of what you do and do not show in class. The *Jeugdjournaal* (a news show aimed at a young audience) often provides useful images. Starting a lesson with images that are (too) horrific can have disruptive effects. Point out the dangers of 1) generalizations and 2) simplifications. A shooting incident, especially a terrorist attack, is always a 'wicked problem': a problem with so many layers and sides to it that you often don't know where to begin.

- Formulate clear guidelines for the conversation

If applicable, refer to other rules or guidelines that are used in class. Interrupt and point out explicit or implicit insults if necessary. Divide talking time, encourage students to listen to each other's viewpoints and reward them if they do so. Ask students to respond to the viewpoints of other students. Summarize viewpoints regularly, and ask questions.

- Don't judge

An important goal of a conversation on a controversial societal topic is to learn about different opinions and points of view. Therefore, don't judge students' opinions, but go in-depth in order to find out where their opinions come from, and why they think this way.

- Don't end on a negative note

A conversation on violent incidents can be hard to process. Try to end on a positive note, like a summary of what the students themselves can do or what they learned from the conversation.

- Let students figure out for themselves how they can contribute (see 'Offer an action perspective').

An example of a lesson plan for discussing violent incidents.

After a shooting incident like the one in Utrecht, students are full of strong emotions that they are willing to share. It is important to provide them with an environment to do so, especially when it is still unclear what exactly happened. Use the lesson to consider and talk about these emotions and experiences. Even though it may be tempting and easier to explain what happened yourself, it is more valuable if you engage in a conversation with your students and let them try to comprehend what happened from their own point of view.

Start:

Tell the students there has been a shooting incident and possibly an attack in Utrecht and that you would like to talk with them about it. Ask students what happened and try to find an answer on the following questions for example:

- What happened (Where, when, why, how)?
- Where were you, did you notice anything?
- What is the effect of the shooting incident on the people around you and in your town?
- What different forms of violence are there, can you name them?
- What are different causes of violence? Does there always have to be one specific cause?
- How can the government prevent violence?
- What can you yourself do to prevent violence?
- When is something considered terrorism?
- How afraid must you be of terrorism?

Core

The following steps can then be followed.

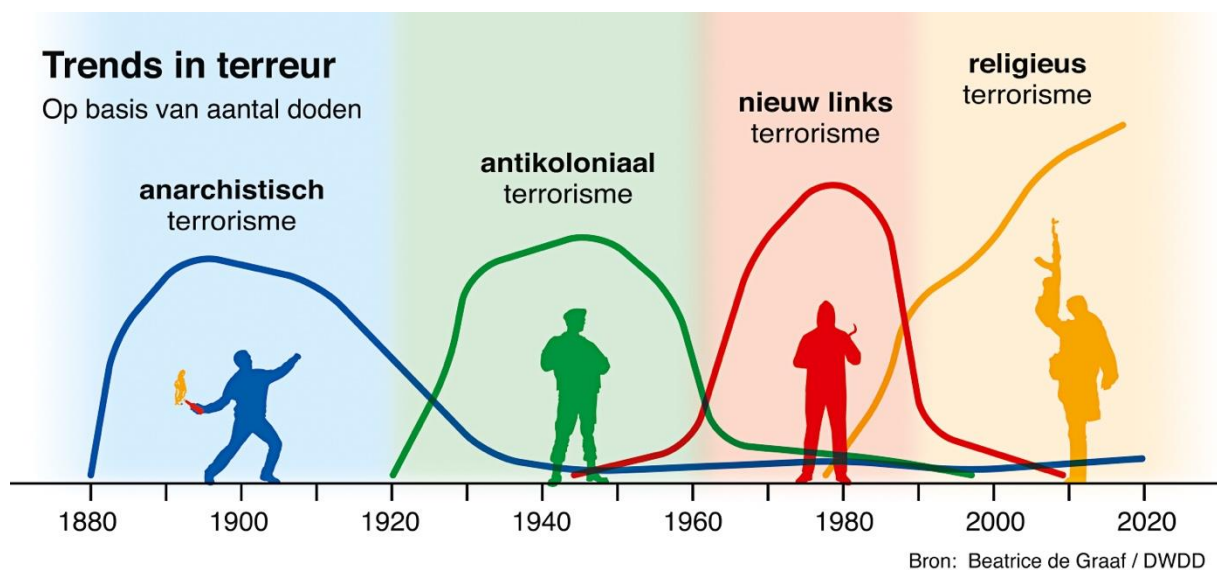
1. Optional: let the students answer questions for themselves. Have them write their answers down on paper.
2. Start by asking the questions you believe to be most important and write them down on the blackboard in front of the class. Also provide room for personal stories from students. Let them share their experiences.
3. Try to write down different arguments and viewpoints for each question on the blackboard. Write down multiple opinions, clarifying that there are multiple perspectives from which to regard the incident. Draw up clear limits to what can and cannot be said during the discussion (discrimination, intentional insults, generalizations, oversimplifications). It is important to question assumptions, try to get to the core of the discussion and counter any ideas that are not acceptable.

It is possible that students are afraid of terrorism because of the shooting incident, especially since the attack in Christchurch was only a few days ago (and because terrorism is now considered and used as a motive in the indictment). Provide the following factual information to comfort students and point out the differences between soft- and hard targets. The question that could accompany this could be: should you be afraid of terrorism?

- “Statistic answer: between 2000 and 2015 a total number of fifteen Dutch people died because of attacks (Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, the seven victims of the attack in Apeldoorn, and the six victims in Alphen a/d Rijn, excluding both perpetrators of these last two attacks). Not all of these attacks were deemed and defined as terrorism.” Of these attacks, only the attack on Theo van Gogh is considered to be a terrorist attack. The political murder on Pim Fortuyn was in a period when there was not yet any terrorism legislation in

place. The other victims, in Apeldoorn and in Alphen, were killed during attacks that were not labelled as terrorism, because there was no information on the motives of the perpetrators. In short, statistically speaking there is still only a small chance to fall victim of a terrorist attack.

- Historical answer: terrorism comes and goes in waves (see the image below). Even though it cannot be predicted when a certain wave of terrorist attacks will be over, it is in line with expectations that a period of attacks will be followed by a decrease of violence; in the last 150 years a terrorist wave lasted around forty years. We are currently in the so-called 'fourth wave' of terrorist violence. Since the late nineties, the total amount of attacks increased and attacks are deadlier per average. Therefore, it is not surprising that people, and students, are scared of terrorist attacks. Moreover, some experts argue that a fifth wave is in the making, comprised of incidents motivated by tribal extremism (nationalist extremism, racial violence etc).



- Psychological answer: terrorists want us to be afraid. It is their aim to induce fear and expose vulnerabilities in their opponents. Terrorists use violent means in order to fulfil this purpose. Not only eyewitnesses, but societies at large witness terrorist attacks. Media attention for terrorist attacks, therefore, plays important part in providing terrorists with a podium. That is why it is so important that we talk about our fears, in order to control them. Terrorists want you to be scared and have an unsubstantiated opinion. It helps to get all the facts straight and not to panic.

Are schools a target?

Terrorist targets can be divided into two categories: 'hard targets' and 'soft targets'. Hard targets are clear targets such as a police commander, a minister, politician, or a writer, artist or columnist (e.g. Theo van Gogh). Soft targets are targets that are harder to secure: shopping malls, hotels, places of worship or schools. Soft targets are often chosen as a sort of marketing stunt. Because soft targets are vulnerable, these attacks receive a lot of media attention and compassion. As a result terrorists and terrorist organizations that attack soft targets get a lot of attention and are given a medium. This enables terrorists to instil fear in society, which is often their aim.

In the past, schools have been 'soft targets' of terrorist attacks. Think of the Beslan school siege or the Moluccans that took an elementary school in Assen hostage. Still, schools are not that often targeted by terrorists. They often choose places of worship (recently in Christchurch, 15 March 2019), shopping malls or hotels when they look for soft targets.

Closing

End the lesson by focusing on the question why it is important to know the motive of the perpetrator, and not to speculate. For example: wrong information can unnecessarily scare people. Stress that it is possible that there were multiple motives at play. Someone can have a personal trauma, be angry with an entire society, and then still resort to a terrorist ideology.

Emphasize that students can do something for themselves as well (e.g. read up on the subject, not spread incorrect views on terrorism, avoid prejudices etc.).

Further reading (in Dutch):

<https://ter-info.nl/grote-vragen/hoebangmoetenwezijnvoorterrorisme>

<https://ter-info.nl/in-de-klas/controversiele-themas-bespreken>

<https://ter-info.nl/in-de-klas/dos-and-donts-bij-het-bespreken-van-terrorisme-in-de-klas>

<https://www.uu.nl/opinie/dader-en-motief-zijn-soms-net-zo-gelaagd-als-u-en-ik>.

In English:

<https://www.uu.nl/en/opinion/perpetrator-and-motive-are-often-as-layered-as-you-and-i>

Follow-up lessons (in Dutch)

<https://ter-info.nl/in-de-klas> (bv. 'Wat is terrorisme?': <https://ter-info.nl/assets/article/toolboxitems/1325506421.pdf>)

About TerInfo

TerInfo is a mobile web platform aimed to increase societal resilience against terrorism in primary and secondary education.

The platform helps teachers to discuss terrorism with groups of different ages in a clear, factual, responsible and engaging way. TerInfo offers brief and balanced information and useful pedagogical tools to stimulate discussions on terrorism in the classroom: what its aim is, why it is condemnable and what can be done about it. In the case of a terrorist related event that affects schools in The Netherlands, TerInfo helps teachers with quickly developing a pedagogically justified interpretation of the situation and its consequences.

The offered material (substantive information on terrorism and lesson material) is developed by experts at Utrecht University, together with education professionals, and is aimed at students with different backgrounds and different ages. Several articles and assignments make clear: what happened, how it can be explained, how we should deal with it and what it means for the school.

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