

Feeling Exposed in Online Class: Student and Teacher Safety in the Online Civics Classroom

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<http://justiceinschools.org>

Narrator: Linda Fraser's heart was pounding as she closed her computer and went to her kitchen to make a cup of tea. Linda's housemate, Kate, was already ready with two steaming mugs.

Kate: Here, sit down and take a break. I've never seen you so rattled after online teaching!

Linda: How on earth could class have gone so far off the rails? I can't help thinking of that teacher from Rotterdam who was forced into hiding because of threats from parents and others on social media.¹ What am I going to do?

Kate: Wait, what happened??

Linda: To be fair, I was slightly nervous about running a controversial issues discussion online with my 17 year-olds². It's hard for me to track their reactions on Zoom the way I can in person. But I truly thought the topic wouldn't be that sensitive: "Should people who drink or smoke a lot pay more for their health insurance?" And I did set expectations for online discussions with the students. It just hadn't occurred to me to worry about students' parents, too.

Kate: You had a parent in the discussion?

Linda: Not at first! The discussion was perfectly normal—actually, it started really well. Students shared a variety of viewpoints, citing freedom of choice, privacy concerns, and public health, among other arguments. But before I could follow up with my next question, Jeffrey's mother popped onscreen. She was so angry!

Mrs. Jansen: What? Now you're telling my son that I don't deserve health care just because I smoke? I'm not worthy?

¹ ['Docent duikt onder vanwege bedreiging na tonen spotprent' | NOS](#) The teacher in Rotterdam received threats after displaying a cartoon in his classroom that some students found offensive and profane.

² In the Netherlands, vocational students range from 16-25 years old. Education is mandatory until the age of 16/they have obtained a starter qualification (see also: [Education in the Netherlands | Nuffic](#)). When students turn 18, they can make decisions about their schooling independent from their caregivers.

Linda: Then students started turning their cameras off. I had no idea what to say!

Mrs. Jansen: I've heard about the ways that leftist teachers try to indoctrinate our kids, but I never thought it would happen to my family. You can be sure I'll be calling Dean Doozer to let her know what you're up to!

Linda: Then Jeffrey's camera feed went dark. The whole class was silent. So I moved to the next part of the lesson—I popped some articles into the chat and asked the students to spend the rest of class time reading them to find the key arguments for or against charging different rates for health insurance based on lifestyle. I told them I would remain online if any of them wanted to speak with her, but they all left.

Kate: Ugh, I'm so sorry, Linda.

Linda: I better email Jeffrey's mom and say I'm sorry she felt disrespected and invite her to sit down and talk. I hope I can reach her before she contacts the dean.

Kate: That makes sense. But remember you're a great civic education teacher. How long have you been at MBO-Holland: eight years? Those kids are so lucky to have you. And in a vocational school of 30,000 students, there's bound to be a challenging parent once in a while, right?

Linda: Yeah, maybe. I just don't know. Controversial issues discussions have always been a key part of my teaching, and I was so good at them in person! But now I'm teaching half my classes online! I thought I was finding my feet again, but was it a mistake to have even tried this? I hate to give up these discussions, but should I really try one online again when I can't control who's present or guarantee my students confidentiality?

Narrator: When she arrived for her next in-person teaching day, Linda was relieved to discover that Jeffrey's mother hadn't followed up on her threat to contact the administration. But her questions about the experience remained. She was glad to have a chance to discuss her concerns at her department's weekly team meeting with her colleagues Stan, Latifa, and Claire.

Linda: So, here's the challenge. How can we prepare our students for respectful participation in civic discourse, both online and in person, if they cannot even practice this skill in school? But at the same time, given what happened with

Jeffrey's mom, is it fair to ask teachers and students to share their views in an unprotected space?

Stan: The answer is simple: there is no way to be 100% sure that classes are not recorded or witnessed by other parties without prior notice. Since we cannot fully protect students—or ourselves—we shouldn't organize online discussions of civic issues.

Linda (*interjecting*): Videoing class without permission is prohibited by law!

Stan: Illegal things happen all the time. We don't know what students are doing at home.

Latifa: But we can do a lot to increase our safety. There's MBO Holland's online education protocol, for example, the one that we adopted from 'SocialmediaIMPACT.'³ At the start of a new module I always remind my students about these guidelines and about our own protocol for online discussions of civic issues. And our discussions have run smoothly.

Linda: I wonder how many parents know about the protocol. I went over guidelines with my students, too, but I still ran into trouble. Maybe it would help if we provided more information at the institution level? Have parents and students sign a form, for example?

Stan: What would they agree to do? Keep their objections to themselves? Don't get me wrong: I do think it's a good thing that we offer online education guidelines at the institute level. I just don't see how the signatory stuff would work. Some parents may feel like they are being asked to shut up, which might create a lot of unrest.⁴

Latifa (*chuckling*): Yeah, before we know it, this could be framed in the media as a leftist-teaching thing.

Linda (*grimacing*): At least Jeffrey's mother didn't threaten to go to the press—only the administration.

Stan: And what if parents and students refuse to sign? Will we have to develop alternative civics classes for them? I'd rather stick to teaching facts and concrete skills in my online classes. Saves us a lot of trouble, and extra work.

³ [Gratis poster Afspraken tijdens de online les - SocialmediaIMPACT](#)

⁴ See, for example, the pushback a school in Tennessee faced after asking parents to sign such waivers: [Rutherford County Schools clarifies "eavesdropping waiver," WSMV Nashville](#).

Latifa: I get the risks. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't organize online discussions at all. After all, students engage with each other on social media all the time. Online, family and even strangers can listen in and comment on their contributions. As civics teachers, we are well positioned to raise students' awareness of their vulnerability online, and to help them learn to cope with negative consequences of their engagement online or in real life.

Stan: True. Our students are vulnerable outside of school. But in their private lives, students can *choose* whether or not to join online civic discussions. In school we would be *forcing* them to participate.

Latifa: But we all agree that teaching discussion is part and parcel of civic education, so why make an exception for online discussion? Our students are not made of sugar: every one of them has experienced or witnessed online conflict by now. Many of our migrant students, for instance, have received hateful messages on social media just because of the color of their skin. They know how to deal with conflict. Most of our students also had social media education in primary and secondary education. Maybe we are making this too big a thing.

Linda (*protesting*): But it is a big thing, *especially* for our students from migrant backgrounds.⁵ By explicitly addressing experiences with harmful speech in our classes and giving them skills to confront this harmful speech, we let our students know that we care about them, that their school cares.

Stan: I disagree. We can show them that we care by not exposing them to yet more potentially unsafe online spaces. Our migrant students, and students from other groups that often experience marginalization, they are the students we most need to protect.

Claire (*visibly upset*): What about us teachers? We are on the line 24/7. What protection do we have? Dealing with conflicts in the regular classroom is enough of a challenge for me.

Latifa (*reassuring*): Moderating discussions can be extremely difficult, especially online. I can definitely understand wanting to reserve discussions for on-site classes, especially when you're still a relatively new teacher.

Claire: On-site classes are not completely safe, either. When I was teaching intercultural competencies before the last election, several students threatened to

⁵ In 2020, 29% of the vocational education students had a migrant background. 23% of those students (or one of their parents) migrated from a non-Western country. Retrieved 9 September 2021 from: [Aantal studenten in het mbo | Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs | OCW in cijfers](#). At MBO-Holland, half of the economics students have a migrant background.

put me on the hotlist for leftist teachers.⁶ And don't forget about Samuel Paty; the anniversary of his beheading just passed.⁷ I haven't organized any discussions for a while now. I just don't want to risk my safety—or my family's.

Linda: I didn't know about that hotlist threat; I'm sorry. I totally understand your reticence. In that sense, we are lucky that there are no formal requirements concerning classroom debates in Citizenship Education legislation for vocational institutes. Each of us can pretty much decide for ourselves what we want to do.

Latifa (*sighing*): Thus maintaining inequality in education. I bet that students from our pre-university institutes have not put their debating classes on hold during the pandemic. Our vocational students deserve the same attention paid to their civic development.⁸

Linda: I wonder whether the school can do more to actively encourage the development of online and offline safe spaces for discussion. My class might have gone very differently if we had that kind of support.

Stan: I can help you out on that one. When Claire had the hotlist incident, I went to Dean Doozer to discuss how to handle the situation. She expressed her sympathy, but that was about it. She basically told me: it's not a criminal offense, so there's little that she can do.

Linda (*sighing*): Leaving it to the individual teacher to restore relations and deal with incidents. So chances are low that Miss Doozer will invest in additional measures to further students' and teachers' sense of safety in online classrooms.

Stan: Of course, there is another option. What if we returned to in-person education full time? Then we wouldn't need to worry about these online discussions.

⁶ In March 2019, the Dutch conservative populist party Forum for Democracy created a hotline and encouraged students to report teachers attempting to indoctrinate the students with those teachers' "favorite political ideas." See <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2019/03/pupils-urged-to-report-left-wing-indoctrination-to-forum-hotline/> or [Meldpunt 'geef je linkse leraar aan' van Forum voor Democratie roept woede op | RTL Nieuws](#)

⁷ In October 2020, French teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded by extremists after showing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed to his middle-school class. The assailant had responded to a video message on YouTube with accusations against the history teacher.

⁸ Numerous studies have examined and/or discussed how schools may sustain the civic opportunity gap between students from (pre-)vocational and (pre-)university education tracks, see e.g., Kahne, J., Middaugh, E., & CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement). (2008). *Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School. Circle Working Paper 59*. Place of publication not identified: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse. Veugelers, W., Groot, I., Stolk, V., & Research for CULT committee. (2017). *Research for CULT Committee Teaching common values in Europe: Study*. Brussels: Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, European Parliament.

Linda: The question of teaching students to engage in civic discourse online wouldn't go away but being able to teach those skills in the onsite classroom would remove some of the challenges. Plus, having our students here in person would have other benefits. I'm worried that we'll see more kids drop out with this blended model;⁹ it's hard to build strong connections over Zoom.

Latifa: I know there's been pushback to this new blended model.¹⁰ But it does allow students more flexibility; we're able to enroll some students who might not be able to come to campus all day, every day. Besides, they'll only be living more of their lives online as time goes on. We need to prepare them.

Linda: Any chance that our board¹¹ would reconsider their decision to make civics a hybrid course?

Stan: Maybe, if enough of us got together. At our next meeting we should start working on a petition asking for citizenship courses like ours to be offered only onsite.

Linda: I'm not fully convinced that's the right course, but that's a question for another day. It's time for the next period.

Narrator: Walking to her class, Linda still felt undecided. While her colleagues had brought up insightful points, she felt like she had more questions than she started with.

Linda: Should I play it safe and stop organizing classroom discussions until I'm teaching all of my classes onsite? Or should I embrace the risk and help the students develop as digital citizens? And considering Stan's final suggestion: should we petition for citizenship courses to be offered 100% on site? Or should we embrace the blended model, as a way for students to prepare for hybrid civic participation in their adult lives? How will I engage students in discussion, now and in the future?

⁹ Elffers, L. (2011). The transition to post-secondary vocational education: students' entrance, experiences, and attainment. Ipskamp drukkers.

¹⁰ To learn more about pushback to blended learning from teachers, teacher unions, student organizations, politicians and scholars, see [Mbo's gaan ook na corona verder met online onderwijs, tegen de wil van de Kamer | De Volkskrant](#)

¹¹ In the Netherlands, members of the school board are appointed. Each educational institute has an (elected) student and teacher council. In addition, there is a national student council and a national teacher council. Vocational education institutes do not have a parent council, and parents have no formal say in curriculum. Depending on the institute, they are invited (more or less) regularly to discuss school matters.