

Feeling exposed in online class: Student and teacher safety in the online civics classroom

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Linda Fraser's heart pounded as she closed her computer and shut down the microphone and camera set-up she had jerry-rigged for online teaching. "How on earth could class have gone so far off the rails?" she wondered. "And with such a simple prompt, too? What if this becomes a thing on social media?" Her mind flashed to the teacher from Rotterdam who had been forced into hiding because of threats from parents and others on social media.¹ She shook her head to clear the frightening thoughts. "What am I going to do?"

In retrospect, Linda couldn't believe how naive she had been. She had been slightly nervous about running a controversial issues discussion with her group of 17 year-olds² online, since it was hard for her to track how they were reacting to the conversation over Zoom the way she did in person. But she had intentionally chosen a topic that she thought wouldn't be particularly sensitive for her students to discuss: "Should people who drink or smoke a lot pay more for their health insurance?" She had also been careful to set expectations for online discussions with her students. It just hadn't occurred to her to worry about students' parents, too.

The discussion had started well. Students had shared a variety of viewpoints, citing freedom of choice, privacy concerns, and public health, among other arguments. But before Linda could follow up with her next question, Jeffrey's mother had popped onto his screen, her face twisted in anger. "What?" she demanded. "Now you're telling my son that I don't deserve health care just because I smoke? I'm not worthy?"

Black boxes appeared across the Zoom room as students clicked to turn their cameras off. Blindsided, Linda sputtered as Jeffrey's mother continued: "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!"

Jeffrey's mother disappeared as his camera feed went dark. The class was silent. Her head spinning, Linda quickly moved to the next part of the lesson. Consulting her lesson plan, she popped several articles into the chat and asked her students to spend the rest of class time reading through them to find the key arguments for or against charging different rates for health insurance based on lifestyle. Though she told her students she would remain online if any of them wanted to speak with her, she was soon the only person left in the Zoom room. Was it a mistake to have even tried this?

Wandering unsteadily into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea, Linda reflected on her Civic Education class at MBO-Holland, a vocational school serving 30,000 students. She had taught civics there for eight years, and felt good about her teaching—or at least she had when she was teaching in person.

Ironically, before COVID-19 hit, she had been known in her department for her ability to deftly lead discussions about controversial issues. But during COVID—and now post-COVID, as the MBO-Holland school administration had figured out they could serve a more diverse and expansive student body, with a smaller budget, by offering online courses—she had been teaching half of her civics lessons online. It had taken her a while to adjust to the new set-up, but she now felt she was finding her feet again. Or at

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.

least she had felt that way until Jeffrey's mother had reamed her out in front of the entire class during their first controversial issues discussion of the semester. The experience left her wondering whether she should even have tried the discussion—and whether she should try anything like it again.

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. The episode had made her see that she just couldn't control who was present at these online discussions or guarantee a confidential space for her students. However, civic discussions had long been a key part of her teaching, and she was reluctant to minimize the role they played in her curriculum. Linda was glad to have a chance to discuss her concerns at her department's weekly team meeting. She knew many of her colleagues were also unsettled by the school's newfound commitment to online and hybrid teaching, particularly when it came to discussions of controversial issues, which could be challenging even under ideal circumstances. She hoped that their views would give her some clarity.

“So, here’s the challenge,” Linda began, after recounting the encounter with Jeffrey’s mother to her colleagues Stan, Latifa, and Claire. “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, is it fair to ask teachers and students to share their views in an unprotected space? I just don’t know.”

Stan, a longtime teacher at MBO-Holland, replied immediately: “Well, you kind of give the answer yourself already. The main question is: can we organize online discussions, whether spontaneous or prepared, in a way that protects us and our students? 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. Hence, we cannot fully protect students—or ourselves—so we shouldn’t organize online discussions of civic issues.”

“Although,” Linda interjected, “making and sharing videos from class without permission is prohibited by law.”

“Illegal things happen all the time,” Stan argued. “We don’t know what students are doing at home.”

“I agree that we cannot completely guarantee that our students, and we ourselves, are safe in class,” Latifa began. Before beginning her career at MBO-Holland, she had worked for several years at a nonprofit organization that helped migrant workers find jobs. She and Linda had joined the faculty in the same year and had become friends as well as colleagues. “However, 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. Having these guidelines has made online discussions run smoothly in my class.”

“But I wonder how many parents know about the protocol?” Linda asked. “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?”

“What would they agree to do?” Stan asked. “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

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

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

“Yeah, before we know it, this could be framed in the media as a leftish-teaching thing,” Latifa chuckled.

“At least Jeffrey’s mother didn’t threaten to go to the press—only the administration,” Linda said, grimacing.

“And there’s a practical problem,” Stan continued. “We cannot force parents and students to sign. What if they refuse to? 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.”

“It’s a complicated question,” Latifa mused. “But just because we can’t prevent problems from arising, 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.”

“True,” Stan agreed. “Our students are vulnerable outside of school as well. 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.”

“But we all agree that teaching discussion is part and parcel of civic education, right?” Latifa asked. Her colleagues nodded. “Then 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. Our migrant students, for instance, receive hateful messages on social media at some point just because of the color of their skin. They know how to deal with conflict. Most of our students have also had social media education in primary and secondary education. Maybe we are making this too big a thing.”

“But it is a big thing,” Linda protested, “*especially* for our students from migrant backgrounds.⁵ Latifa, you know the discrimination they face when looking for an internship,⁶ and I’ve heard your horror stories from your last job. I’ve seen what my students here face! 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.”

“I disagree,” Stan objected. “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.”

“What about us teachers?” Claire, who had been silent thus far, burst out. She was a second-year teacher who often turned to this group for support. “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. I would feel very uncomfortable adding another layer of complexity with the online element.”

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](#).

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.

⁶ A 2018 study from the Verwey Jonker Institute among 26.000 graduated MBO students in The Netherlands showed, amongst others, how 9 percent of students with a migrant background had to apply (more than) 10 times for an internship, against 3 percent of their peers. These insights also generate media attention in The Netherlands, e.g., [Mbo'er met migrantenachtergrond zoekt zich suf naar een stage | Trouw](#)

“Moderating discussions can be extremely difficult, especially online,” Latifa affirmed. “I can definitely understand wanting to reserve discussions for on-site classes, especially when you’re still a relatively new teacher.”

“On-site classes are not completely safe, either,” Claire went on, visibly upset. “When I was teaching intercultural competencies before the last election, several students threatened to put me on the hotlist for leftist teachers.⁷ And don’t forget about Samuel Paty; the anniversary of his death just passed.⁸ I haven’t organized any discussions for a while now. I just don’t want to risk my safety—or my family’s.”

“I didn’t know about that hotlist threat; I’m sorry. I totally understand your reticence,” Linda reassured her. “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.”

“Thus maintaining inequality in education,” Latifa sighed. “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.”⁹

“I wonder,” Linda mused, “whether the school can do more to actively encourage the development of online and offline safe spaces for discussion, and encourage students and parents to share their views in a respectful manner. My class might have gone very differently if we had that kind of support.”

“I can help you out on that one,” Stan replied. “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 offence, so there’s little that she can do.”

“Leaving it to the individual teacher to restore relations and deal with incidents,” Linda sighed. “I see. So chances are low that Miss Doozer will invest in additional measures to further students’ and teachers’ sense of safety in online classrooms. We seem to be on our own.”

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

“The question of teaching students to engage in civic discourse online wouldn’t go away,” Linda responded, “but being able to teach those skills in the onsite classroom would remove some of the

⁷ 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](#)

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

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;¹⁰ it's hard to build strong connections over Zoom."

"I know there's been pushback to this new blended model,"¹¹ Latifa said. "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."

"Plus, these discussions of controversial issues don't automatically become safe just because we're back in person," Claire pointed out. "I personally won't be running them at all, but I do see how being back onsite could make them easier for you, Linda."

"Any chance that our board would reconsider their decision to make civics a hybrid course?" Linda asked.

"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," Stan suggested.

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

Walking to her next class, Linda still felt undecided. While her colleagues had brought up insightful points, she felt like she had more questions than she started with. Should she play it safe and stop organizing classroom discussions until she was teaching all of her classes onsite? Or should she embrace the risk, together with her students, and help them build the public discourse skills they would need as digital citizens? Could she resume organizing online discussions with some extra precautions, and try to view any bumpy moments as learning opportunities?

And considering Stan's final suggestion: should she and her team petition for citizenship courses to be offered 100% on site, to facilitate both spontaneous and structured conversations on civic issues that students grapple with? Or should she embrace the blended model, as a way for students to prepare for hybrid civic participation in their adult lives? How would she engage students in discussion, now and in the future?

¹⁰ Elffers, L. (2011). The transition to post-secondary vocational education: students' entrance, experiences, and attainment. Ipskamp drukkers.

¹¹ 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](#)