

Dieter Düwel, Jennifer von der Grün

Freedom of Speech vs Ethical Censorship

Holding a debate on the question if there should be ‘unlimited freedom of speech’ on the basis of the video *Innocence of Muslims*

(ab Jahrgangsstufe 10)

Objectives

- to introduce the pupils to the techniques of holding a debate
- to introduce the pupils to various comments on the film “Innocence of Muslims” and reactions to it in the Islamic world

The Topic

The film “Innocence of Muslims”: background information

In September 2012 the publication of the anti-Islamic film “Innocence of Muslims” caused uproar around the world, especially in Islamic countries.

Little is known about the origin and the production of the video. It was made in Southern California by a network of right-wing Christians called *Media for Christ*. They include Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, a convicted fraudster, who was identified as the key figure in the making of the film, and Steve Klein, an insurance salesman, who acted as its promoter. They obviously intended to provoke reactions in Islamic countries, which they succeeded in as the video portrays Islam’s founder Muhammad as a bloodthirsty womaniser and paedophile.

The protests against the video spread to various countries in the Middle East. In Libya four American diplomatic personnel including the ambassador were killed. The worst of the violence was in Yemen, where at least five Yemenis were killed when hundreds of protesters stormed the American embassy. Demonstrations also took place in Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia,

where the police fired tear gas to disperse the crowds. Anti-American protest was also held in the Palestinian enclave of Gaza.

In the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clearly rejected the video and the mistaken belief in some parts of the Arab world that the American government had somehow sponsored and condoned it. She labelled the film as ‘disgusting and reprehensible’ trying ‘to denigrate a great religion and to provoke rage’. But she also pointed out that the American constitution did not allow the prevention of such videos being published.

The subject ideally lends itself to a discussing the different views on it in the form of a debate.

Debating in the Classroom

The debate is a form of verbal expression and argument that is popular in English-speaking countries, particularly in schools and universities. Debates can be an essential part of the learning process, but if not carried out correctly, they can evolve into a loud argument in which either no one gets their opinion heard or only one or two people prevail. In order to have a successful debate a few rules should be considered.

Suggested Treatment

Holding a debate about the video *Innocence of Muslims* and the right to freedom of speech

In order to elucidate the different positions towards freedom of speech, the pupils could hold a debate in class.

Before they are introduced to the steps of holding a debate, they have to be made familiar with the topic they will be discussing.

First the teacher can briefly explain the issue on the basis of the information about it in **The Topic**, then the students can briefly express the ideas that immediately come to their minds on this issue.

After that the pupils read the comments on T1. They formulate the topic of the debate (unlimited freedom of speech vs. ethical/moral censorship) and identify the various positions concerning the question if there should be unlimited freedom of speech or in how far religious and moral values should be considered.

The class/course should be divided into two main groups, one supporting the idea of unlimited freedom of speech, the other opposing this standpoint. Should the class/course contain a large number of pupils, the two main groups can be divided again, but the smaller groups still work on either of the two standpoints.

It is helpful if each group not only researches its own topic but researches the opposing team’s topic as well. This has the advantage that all pupils learn about and realize the complexity of the issue.

Before the teacher hands out the debate assignments (W1), he or she should explain that some students might be debating positions opposite to their own beliefs. This is an important skill for them to learn.

W3 offers some words and phrases that can be used in a debate.

T1 Comments on the Film 'Innocence of Muslims' and on the Reactions to It in the Arab World

1. "Muslims should know that Islamic extremist groups bear some responsibility for the uproar taking place now, and for the collision of the world cultures. [...] The moderate people and clerics in the Islamic world should do their best to isolate and stop such groups that do not represent the true moderate values of our religion."

(Sheik Hameed Marouf, a Sunni cleric in Baghdad)

www.timesofisrael.com/islam-vs-tolerance-debated-in-prophet-films-wake/

2. "When they are told that the United States government had no part in the production of the video and deplores its content, educated Libyans and Egyptians reply (reporters tell us), 'Well, if they think it's bad and against their values, why didn't they stop it or punish those who produced it?'. The standard response is that we Americans don't suppress or penalize ideas we regard as wrong and even dangerous; in accordance with the First Amendment, we tolerate them and allow them to present themselves for possible purchase in the marketplace of ideas."

(Stanley Fish in the *New York Times*, September 17, 2012)

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/libya-violence-and-free-speech/>

3. "There is no doubt that most Muslims take offense at anyone mocking the prophet. [...] The great divide is over the response. The vast majority of Muslims understand that the world is now interconnected and all kinds of material – good or offensive – pours in."

(Mustafa Alani, an analyst at the Geneva-based Gulf Research Center)

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4. "The whole thing, our reaction, was way, way over the top. [...] I think the film is meant to provoke us as Muslims.

[...] My personal view is that we should have ignored it. It received much more attention than it deserves. Really, it was not worth people dying for."

(Ali Abdel-Halim, a 22-year-old business graduate from Cairo)

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5. "The Arab world is on the edge of choosing between joining the modern world and political development, or to remain as in the last few centuries. [...] There shouldn't be a trade-off. But it's an enormous challenge, and it will take time."

(Khalil al-Anani, an expert on Islamist movements)

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6. "The Muslims are taught to die for God, not to live for God, so I think that the chances of moderation are limited in our Islamic world. [...] The West should accept the fact that Muslims might tolerate a specific level of criticism on Islam, but not mockery or blasphemy."

(Hassan Rahim, a Baghdad businessman)

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7. "We sent our protest message in a civilized and modern way, and it should be known that this movie has unified Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, and has unified all strong believers in God all over the world."

(Shukri Abu Fadel, a 42-year-old teacher from Gaza City)

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8. Even in the hardest of cases, the old arguments against censorship remain the best. The makers of *Innocence of Muslims* have reactionary religious prejudices and probably reactionary racial prejudices too. Reactionaries are not hard to beat in open debate. If



you can't beat them without calling for the cops or reaching for a gun, you should get out of the debating business and make way for someone who can.

(Nick Cohen in *The Observer*, September 16, 2012)

www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/16/nick-cohen-islam-film-censorship

9. It is a liberal fantasy to pretend we do not have censorship all over the place. Even here, my comments can be removed or moderated. Similarly, I cannot simply publish whatever sick photos I want in full public view and not expect prosecution. So let's not pretend we don't exercise censorship when we want. [...]

In that sense, of course the video should have been removed and condemned. Sadly the killings may have gone ahead for a different reason



but maybe a whole group of people would have had one less grudge against the USA that might count for something in the future.

(*The Observer*, ItsMeSimon/email, 16 September 2012)

www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/16/nick-cohen-islam-film-censorship

10. Clearly, to any reasonable person, ridiculing or tramping on the sensitivities of those holding differing spiritual values is an invitation for serious trouble.

Special caution should be exercised in defaming the values of societies that have a history of violent retaliatory actions. [...] For this reason, any person insensitive enough to provoke such a response should be considered to have performed an unlawful act and subject to appropriate punishment.

(Stanley Graves, Lynnwood, USA)

http://seattletimes.com/html/northwestvoices/2019185341_libyalets18.html

11. The United States will not apologize for protecting free speech. All speech, even reprehensible speech, is protected by the United States Constitution. The U.S. bans no speech. Protecting the right of a person to speak their mind without fear of government reprisal is not an acceptance of that particular view. It is the protection of that person's guaranteed right to free speech, nothing more.

Ideals like free speech cannot be diminished by the work of a hateful, racist, idiot who in no way represents America nor has any influence in America. The United States stands for ideals that don't burn away with a burning flag in the street, either. We will defend the right of this moron to speak, we will not defend what that moron says.

Actions speak much louder than words. Reacting violently to reprehensible speech is something we will not protect. Four families are forever changed by the senseless deaths of their loved ones in Libya. I doubt a single Muslim family was affected in such a way by that stupid video.

(Trevor McDowell, Tukwila, USA)

http://seattletimes.com/html/northwestvoices/2019185341_libyalets18.html

Annotations

blasphemy – something you say or do that is insulting to God or people's religious beliefs

to deplore – to disapprove of something very strongly and criticize it severely, especially publicly

First Amendment – The First Amendment to the United States Constitution is part of the Bill of Rights ensuring

freedom of speech and freedom of religion for all citizens of the US and the freedom of the press

grudge – a feeling of dislike for someone because you cannot forget that they harmed you in the past

to mock – to laugh at someone or something and try to make them look stupid by saying unkind things about them or by copying them

moron – (*informal, not polite*) a very offensive word for someone who you think is very stupid [= idiot]

to penalize – to punish someone or treat them unfairly

the prophet – Muhammad, the founder of the Muslim religion

prosecution – when a charge is made against someone for a crime, or when someone is judged for a crime in a court of law

purchase – something you buy, or the act of buying it

reprehensible – reprehensible behaviour is very bad and deserves criticism

reprisal – something violent or harmful which you do to punish someone for something bad they have done to you

retaliatory – done against someone because they have harmed you

to ridicule – to laugh at a person, idea etc. and say that they are stupid

trade-off – a balance between two opposing things, that you are willing to accept in order to achieve something

to tramp on – to walk heavily on

uproar – a lot of noise or angry protest about something

● W1 Debate Assignments

1. In order to hold a debate, divide yourselves into two groups. Each group takes on the role of one representative of one side of the issue in question and writes a speech presenting that person's viewpoint (pro-con).

2. Decide how many students will be on each team. 2–3 students per team is adequate. The rest of the class should be audience members for the debate.

3. One member of the class/course should be the chairman/chairwomen of the debate. It is his/her job to introduce the topic, keep an eye on the time limits and to decide whose turn it is to speak.

4. It's important to know that some of you might be debating positions opposite to your beliefs.

5. You might find it a good idea to arrange chairs and tables in a way that the positioning of each debating side is made clear, see diagram below.

6. Before and after the debate the speakers should shake hands. It creates a mood of mutual respect and tolerance. It helps to make the debate more civil and authentic.

7. The audience is given the evaluation sheet (W2). Don't forget that it is their job to judge the debate objectively.

8. Agree on a time structure. Decide on times for opening the debate (chairman) and for the presentations of each speaker, e.g. one minute for the chairman, five minutes for each speaker.

9. Begin the debate with one member of the pro side (first speaker A1) explaining their position. After that the first member of the con side (B1) presents their arguments in the same way. Then it is the first side's turn (second speaker A2) to add more arguments and to refute the arguments of his/her opponent. This is followed by the second speaker of the con side (B2), who completes the presentation of his/her group's standpoints and refutes the ideas of his/her opponents.

The speeches must not be interrupted.

Remember that the aim of the speech is to convince the listeners of your views.

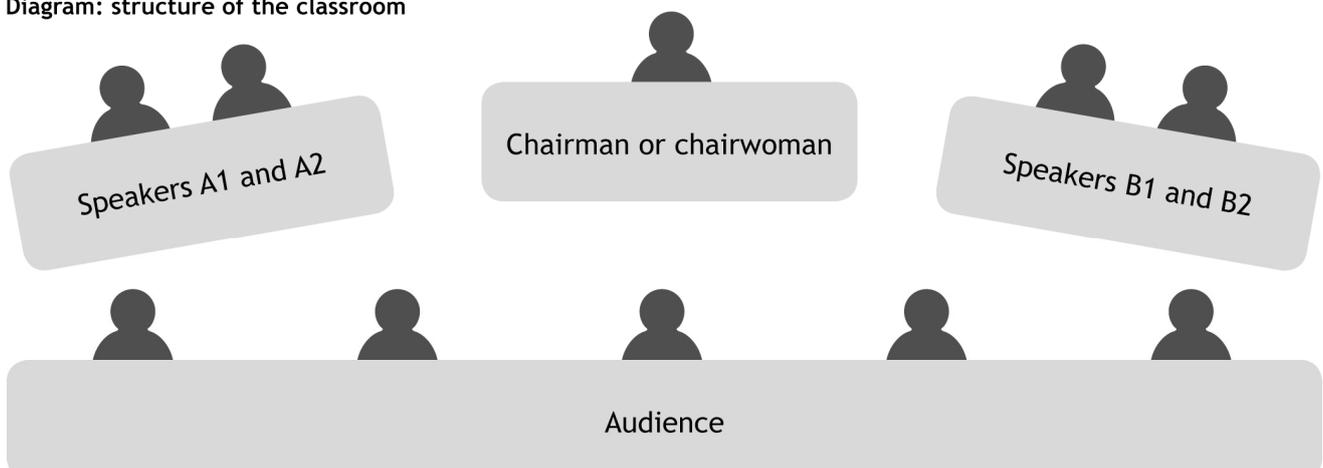
10. After the two sides have presented their arguments and commented on the counter-arguments, the debate is opened to the public, i.e. the rest of the class/course. The members of the audience can ask questions as well as express their own opinions on the issue of the debate.

11. Finally a vote is held as to whose arguments and rhetorical techniques are the most convincing. It should be made clear that it is the audience's job to judge the debate objectively.

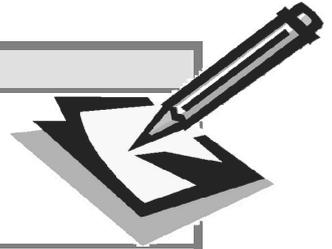
The audience should have time to fill in their evaluation sheet (W2), which is the basis of their vote. They can document various aspects of the debate, most of all, of course, the effectiveness of the arguments and the form of the presentation.

12. The last step can be a discussion among all members of the class/course about the presentations of both sides and the debate in general.

Diagram: structure of the classroom



● W2 Holding a Debate: Evaluation Sheet



Criteria	Rate 10–1	Comment
Appearance of team: gestures/posture, etc.	A: B:	
Introduction/opening statement(s)	A: B:	
Interacting with team members and the audience	A: B:	
Statements not read from cards/free presentation	A: B:	
Speaking loudly and clearly enough to be heard	A: B:	
Specific reference to the arguments made by the opposing team	A: B:	
The team members participating equally	A: B:	
Answers to the audience's questions well thought out	A: B:	
Respect shown for the opposing team, e.g. no name calling, interruptions	A: B:	

Overall points: A: /90 Points B: /90 Points

● W3 Holding a Debate: Useful Words and Phrases



Opening the debate (chairman)

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this debate.
Welcome from this side of the house.
The subject/topic/motion of the debate today is ...

Presenting a standpoint

I would like to introduce our standpoint by ...
In the first place we would like to make clear that ...
Let me come to our first/second/next argument
The main argument focuses on ...
The first point I would like to raise is that ...
Our position can be explained as follows ...
Here's the main aspect we would like to raise.
Just to be clear, this is what I mean.
When we say..., we mean that ...
I would like to put forward this argument/the following arguments.

Rebuttal

I see your point, but I think...
I think I can understand your point, but let me respond to it.
Yes, I understand, but I'm of the opinion that...
That's all very interesting, but the problem is that...
I'm afraid I can't quite agree with you.
I said that..., but the other side has not replied to our point.
There are two aspects that I have succeeded in establishing.
I must stress/emphasize/point out that our point has not been refuted by the other side.
That's one way to think about it. However, ...
At first sight, your argument(s) seem(s) to be true, but you have to consider ...
You unfortunately failed to reveal ...
It is generally accepted these days that ...
You must take into account/consideration the fact that ...
The first speaker has claimed that..., but in fact/ on the contrary ...

Conclusion

To sum up, I would like to emphasize again that...
Let's sum up where we stand in this debate.
Let me summarize our position...
In summary, I would like to point out that ...
The simple truth is that ...
After careful consideration we must conclude that ...
And for all these reasons I would like to state that ...