

17 Witch hunt

Topics: **critical thinking,**
media literacy

Recommended age group: 10+

Participant count: up to 20 participants

Activity duration: 40 minutes

Methods of education: role play, reflection

Aims of the activity:

- accept the existence of different opinions and information,
- be aware of differing points of view on a certain matters /phenomenon,
- admit the influence of authority on the polarisation of society,
- analyse our tendencies and thought processes while working on a certain task,
- assess our argumentation skills,
- notice manipulation and argumentation fouls in a discussion.

Equipment: pieces of paper with the role of „a citizen“ for each participant (we may also whisper the role to each participant if the pieces of paper are not available)

Keywords: critical thinking, argumentation, argumentation fouls, manipulation, polarisation of society

Activity process:

1. The participants sit in a circle so that everyone can see each other and can communicate.
2. We set the atmosphere by telling a short motivational story: *„Imagine this situation: we find ourselves in the 17th century. We live in a town where various people live. Some of them know each other well, some don't. This era is also well-known for the witches who live among the common honest people. They're inconspicuous but they're among us.“*
3. We explain that each participant is about to receive the role of a citizen or a witch. If someone gets the role of a witch, they need to hide it and can't admit it to the group. They will try to persuade others to believe they're also a citizen.
4. We assign a role to each participant. Even though the participants have been informed about the possibility of being assigned the role of a witch or a citizen, we secretly assign the role of „a citizen“ to each participant (we

Topics



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- may whisper the role to each participant or alternatively let everyone pick it randomly by drawing one of the pieces of paper with the role written on them).
5. We explain they can't show the pieces of paper to each other and the task can only be resolved based on a reciprocal communication and argumentation. Depending on our time allowance and the number of participants we set the time for working on the task (10 – 20 minutes).
 6. We may or may not state how many witches there are in the group (how many participants have been assigned the role of a witch). The stated number of witches should be lower than the number of the citizens.
 7. We encourage the participants to create as many witch-free groups as possible (a group must consist of at least three citizens). According to time restrictions and the group structure, we may challenge the participants to create one big witch free group.
 8. When the group is/groups are formed, we invite „the witches“ to reveal themselves. No one responds as no one has been assigned the role of a witch.
 9. We conduct the final analysis of the activity on two different levels:
 - a) critical thinking – the ability to understand and assess information, to debate and to notice manipulation.
 - b) tolerance/intolerance and exclusion of certain people from society – putting emphasis on differences whilst at the same time showing preference for the attacking group. The questions for the reflection are listed below.
 10. We explain the terms: critical thinking, manipulation, argumentation, and argumentation fouls (we may use examples from the activity as reference). The glossary from the (Un)safe in the net handbook is also a suitable resource.
 11. Even though no negative roles were assigned for the activity, a situation in which some of the participants feel uncomfortable may occur. For example, while trying to convict a participant of being a witch verbal attacks might occur, or indeed insults concerning physical imperfections (appearance, ways expression) or religion and beliefs. It's important to watch how the activity progresses and how the participants interact and to intervene in the case of any aggravation of the situation. We also watch the participant's reactions during the reflection, to ensure that no one retains a previously unassigned negative role even after the activity ends.

Final analysis:

- *How satisfied are you with the solution results?*
- *How did you proceed while working on the solution/figuring the roles?*
- *What did you feel like when you were a part of the big group (the citizens group)?*
- *What did you feel like when the people didn't want you to be a part of a certain group because they thought you were a witch?*
- *What was your reaction when you were labeled a witch? Did you start to defend yourself or to attack someone else?*
- *What assumptions did you use to judge whether someone was or wasn't a witch? (information, allegations)*
- *What arguments did you use to defend your own position as a citizen?*
- *What arguments did you hear the most often from the others when defending their positions?*
- *Why did you believe the group contained any witches?*

- Who could be put into the „witch“ category (those persecuted) by society in real life? (politicians, groups, NGOs, minorities, etc.)
- What or who supports the opinion that „witches“ exist, in real life? What's their motivation?
- Would you change anything about your behavior in the future if someone tells you something about another person?
- What can you do and what should you be aware of in similar situations?
- What is your takeaway from this activity? What have you realised?

The story of the activity:

This activity is inspired by an unknown high school teacher who used a similar activity when teaching about the Salem Witch Trials lawsuit. The Salem witch trials were a series of interrogations and prosecutions of those accused of witchcraft in the Massachusetts colony between February 1692 and May 1693. More than 200 people were accused, 19 of whom were found guilty and executed by hanging (14 women and 5 men). One other man was tortured to death during the trial for refusing to ask for forgiveness, and at least five people died in prison. It was the most ruthless witch hunt in the history of the United States.

The Salem Witch Trials are one of the best known cases of mass hysteria in colonised America. In political rhetoric and in popular literature, this true story is used as a warning example of the dangers of religious extremism and false accusations.

Although we may see this as a medieval phenomenon, allegations and suspicions of witchcraft have been held for a long time, even in more developed countries. In Europe, the last witch execution took place in 1782.

Activity variations:

- At the beginning of the activity we can decide to use a different situation/topic for the motivational story (e.g.: humans and aliens, citizens and mafia, etc.).
- The participants can also be assigned individual roles they can take on while working on the activity (for example: farmer, merchant, tavern keeper, priest, etc.). This possibility requires more time to conduct the activity and the reflection.
- We may divide the activity into episodes. During each episode, the group as a majority chooses the participant considered to be a witch. This participant reveals their identity and stops contributing to the discussion, however, they continue to watch the role play. The rest of the participants continue in the same pattern until they realize they're all citizens or until they all label each other as witches.

Source: WIKIPEDIA. *Salem witch trials*. [online]. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salem_witch_trials>

WIKIPEDIA. *Salemské čarodejnice*. [online]. Available at: <https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salemsk%C3%A9_%C4%8Darodejnice>