

How to stay sane in an age of division

A conversation

The group ...

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Elif Shafak is a British-Turkish author who is entitled to wear many hats – novelist, commentator, activist, strategic change maker and academic with a PhD in Political Science. Her non-fiction works include **How to stay sane in an age of division** (2020, Profile Books). In this short, almost essay-length, book Shafak posits that **“ours is an age of contagious anxiety”**, in which many feel overwhelmed by day-to-day events, “by injustice, by suffering”. She considers the often pernicious role of formal and social media, how extremist views are moving into private and public areas, and the trichotomy of information, knowledge and wisdom.

Shafak does, however, offer some hope in arguing that listening to each other, and especially those with different views to one’s own, can **“nurture democracy, empathy and our faith in a kinder and wiser future”**.

A Tide~ network group came together to discuss Shafak’s work and what inspiration it might offer for Tide’s future. The group began by responding to -

“What one thing stands out as being important for us to debate?”
Any of the comments [below] could have been the starting point for a lengthy and absorbing discussion.

Flexible / Multiple identities

Identities

Public spaces invaded by extremist views

No short cuts to understanding complexity

Apathy as a response to being overwhelmed

Damaging to reduce to a single characteristic

Burden of being a teacher

However, time forced the group to focus on selected aspects of Shafak’s discourse, especially the manner in which she **challenges individuals to become active citizens without being “preachy”; to accept complexity of issues; and to recognise emotional and logical aspects of creating change**. As the discussion progressed, Shafak’s themes, which include the polarisation of society, the creation of more ‘us-them situations’, and the introduction of “Storyland” - a place with “no borders, no passports or police, no barbed wire fences, and no need for any of these” - seized the group’s attention.

On reflection, the conversation coalesced around key themes.

Conscious Optimism / Creative Pessimism

A recurring theme in the discussion was the need to address the pessimism within society that has been accentuated during the pandemic, and channel it into creating “something better” - be that in school, the local area, British society or the global community. Hans Rosling’s possibilism rather than optimism was quoted as providing a lens through which to view the future, one that may help overcome feelings of helplessness.

Such feelings may originate from the sheer complexity of “future problems to be faced”, some new, some existing before Covid.

Shafak’s entreaty to not be afraid of complexity was echoed by the group and seen as a prerequisite to understanding current events. However, it was suggested that the nature of the demands on schools pre-Covid did not lend themselves to looking in depth at complex issues or at trying to unpack them so both teachers and learners could gain more understanding.

It was recognised that craving simplicity would help no-one, including learners, to handle “big issues” that are complex by their very nature.

Danger or privilege of withdrawing/becoming observer from afar

Does education guarantee anything?

Importance of learning from difference

Danger of staying in an echo chamber



Post-Pandemic Challenges

Deep divisions existed within society (be that national or global) prior to, say, March 2020 and there is evidence that those divisions have since become greater. How can we help heal society's deep divisions? How can fractured relationships be repaired? **The causes of such divisions are far from simple and one very real challenge is “How do we get learners to handle the complex, underlying causes?”**



In the past many teachers have welcomed the opportunity to work collaboratively on making complex issues accessible to learners, and one outcome of ‘home learning’ may be the need for teachers to resurrect the notion of learners talking together to share experiences and to deconstruct complexity. It was suggested that such collaboration in the past, say through Wenger’s Communities of Practice, had sometimes become a means of management, rather than a framework for teacher support and creativity. One challenge would be to avoid this pitfall.

Individuals and communities will need space and support to cope with the post-pandemic landscape. To simply abandon learners to adjust alone will not suffice. Teachers will have to enable learners to deconstruct complexity because it is quite possible that in the future learners will feel lost because the world will in some ways be different to how it was, and in ways that as yet are unclear. Networks and systems will be needed to support learners as they try to cope and to help them lose any fear of complexity and, indeed, the unknown. This is equally true of teachers as they too adjust.

Talk and conversations were seen as crucial for learning (for all ages), but not just in an “echo chamber” i.e. with those who hold the same views as oneself. There is a very real need to have conversations with people you disagree with and to listen to other viewpoints and opinions. These are difficult conversations, perhaps encapsulated by the phrase ...

“I disagree with your view, not you”.

Teachers will need to help pupils develop skills such as listening to those with whom they disagree so they can engage in these sometimes uncomfortable conversations.

Most communication channels, particularly social media, have become dominated by political personalities, with overly simplistic phrases and slogans. There is a need to get beyond these ‘images’ and slogans to reveal the underlying causes as to why such individuals and groups get support and to explore the ideas they represent ... and to address such individuals’ and communities’ concerns, say, relating to migration.

However, it is important that we reflect the breadth of how people experienced the pandemic. In the discussion we identified some positives for us; for example, time to think, to enhance existing or learn new creative skills such as art, cookery, music, as well as spend more time with family and loved ones.



It may also be that during the pandemic the nature of education has resulted in a slowing of tempo in the classroom and that this can be utilised to expand learning away from the pursuit of knowledge, as defined by, say, a set of facts, to encompass aspects that previously were marginalised or even ignored; an opportunity to distinguish between ...

knowledge (that gives an illusion of understanding),
understanding (a realisation of how things are) and
wisdom (an ability to act and think with understanding).

When humans act with wisdom, they draw on both “head and heart”, employing logic and emotion, and such emotional intelligence enables us to both shape and review the impact of our behaviour on others.



Shafak's book is optimistic in the face of such challenges, inspiring a focus on hope, on better listening and on creating an environment where people without power have opportunities to speak and be heard; on becoming active citizens willing and able to challenge abuses of power.

Tide~ Post-Pandemic

It follows from what is stated above that many teachers would benefit from mutual support in supporting their learners. For example, access to resources with integrity, including resources that help learners assess the value of information they receive from a wide range of sources. To be able to do this, teachers have a key role in helping learners develop critical media literacy, perhaps especially relating to social media.

- ❑ *Would learners benefit from a framework of knowledge within which to ask questions, and develop empathy?*
- ❑ *Where is that framework to come from?*
- ❑ *How would it best be used?*

As teachers we are well placed to consider how schools could be different so as to help learners make sense of the world in which they live. What should stay the same? What could change? What contribution could we, as a network, make?

How can we avoid the rush to get back 'to normal' mitigating against rebuilding better? What have we learned?

In conclusion, consider what Elif Shafak says.

"After the pandemic we won't go back to the way things were before. And we shouldn't. 'What we call the beginning is often the end ... The end is where we start from.'"

References

Rosling, H., 2019. Factfulness. Flammarion.

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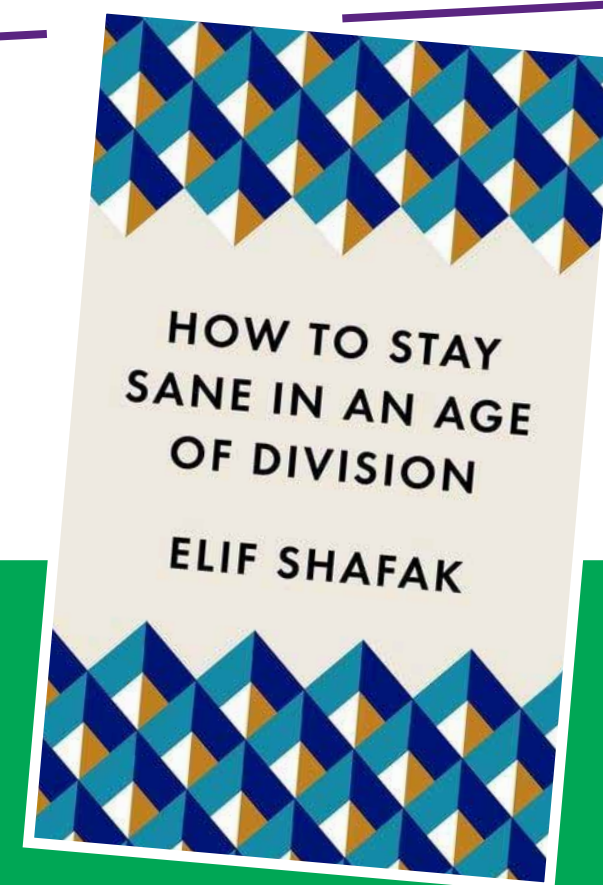
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Consider the inspiration of this book let us know what you think

From our experience we recommend that **'How to stay sane in a world of division'** is a useful stimulus to thinking about contemporary challenges and the implications for teaching.

We would value feedback from other individuals or groups making use of the book.

Please email us



Seeking Conversations

empathy

us - us & them

identity

complexity

democracy

optimism

creative pessimism

multiple belonging

'the other'

anger, anxiety, confusion

fatigue, apathy, wisdom

connect to 'the other'

