The Volcano of Change

Finding broader perspectives and deeper meaning within the group and yourself

BEING | Openness and Learning Mindset

What you will need:

- 15-25
- Individual and groups of 5
- 30 mins preparation
- 2 hrs execution
- Volcano poster on A3, Volcano handouts, tape, sticky notes, markers, reflective journal

Related Tools:

- Experiencing Interdisciplinarity
- Mapping the Maze

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"Invite students to make collective sense of the world they live in and how it affects them, building up to common action for change."

—Judith van den Boogert

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I. Overview

Understanding complex societal issues requires openness, collaboration and a willingness to engage with multiple perspectives. Inspired by interactive methods from the field of International Conflict and Security, particularly the Technology of Participation (ICA-UK), the Volcano of Change fosters structured dialogue, visual facilitation and shared insight, making complexity more accessible and actionable.

Using the volcano metaphor, students map societal challenges and/or other umbrella themes—such as a specific academic discipline or shifting paradigms—based on urgency and visibility: Which issues rumble beneath the surface, erupt into view, lie dormant or are considered extinct? How are students connected to these issues?

This process encourages meaningful dialogue on personal and collective thoughts, emotions and interpretations. It builds a foundation for collaboration and links individual concerns to broader societal themes.

Learning outcomes

- The student is able to consider multiple perspectives openly and to challenge their assumptions by showing willingness to be vulnerable and embrace change and growth
- The student is able to formulate patterns in complex realities and translate them to stories, theories or ideas for change

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II. Learning Activity

Students explore, visualise and categorise societal issues and have meaningful dialogue and engagement by reflecting on their deeper thoughts, feelings and perspectives.

1. Mapping Societal Issues

30 mins

Choose a central topic or umbrella issue relevant to your course. Using the Volcano stages handout, present the Volcano Metaphor as a tool to help the class visualise and categorise societal issues according to the four volcano stages.

Ask the students: "What do you notice in society, or in your field of study, related to *[insert umbrella topic]*?"
Then give them 15 minutes to reflect quietly and write their thoughts in their journal or on paper.

Encourage them to consider trends, challenges, conflicts or themes, and list 3 to 7 issues. For each issue, ask the students to reflect on:

- Observations: What do you observe happening around this issue?
- Feelings: How do you feel seeing this issue?
- Thoughts: What meaning do you give it?
- Response: What is your personal reaction to this issue?

Then, in small groups of two or three students, ask students to spend 15 minutes sharing the issues they identified. For each issue, they write a keyword or short phrase on a separate sticky note. If similar issues come up, they can merge them into one shared sticky note.

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2. Categorising Issues by Urgency

20 mins

Explain the four volcano stages (dormant, active, erupting, extinct) and show the Volcano poster displayed on the wall.

Ask the students to consider: “Are the issues you identified dormant, active, erupting or extinct?”

Instruct the students to work in their small groups to:

- Review their sticky notes and discuss which stage of the volcano each issue belongs to;
- Place each sticky note on the corresponding part of the shared Volcano poster;
- Add extra sticky notes if an issue fits into more than one stage.

As all notes are placed on one shared Volcano poster, the group can gather around and view the full landscape of issues. This visualises how concerns differ or overlap in urgency and visibility.

Tip: for larger groups (20+), consider displaying four separate volcano posters on the wall, each representing one stage. This allows more space and better access for everyone.

3. Making Sense of the Volcano Map

20 mins

Encourage the students to move around the room and read the poster individually. Afterwards, facilitate a discussion with the whole group, using the Volcano poster now filled with sticky notes.

Guide the discussion through three phases:

- Clarify: Ensure shared understanding of the issues placed on the poster;
- Reflect on group perspectives: Discuss patterns, tensions and surprises;
- Identify key themes: Highlight overarching insights or recurring topics.

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Tip: refer to the teacher discussion guide for sample questions and discussion points to support the discussion.

4. Group Reflection and Meaning-Making

20 mins

Ask the students to form new groups of three or four, based on a common one societal issue they feel drawn to and want to explore further.

In their new groups, have students:

- Share their individual journal reflections in Step 1 related to the chosen issue (observations, feelings, thoughts and response);
- Deepen the discussion by exploring observations, emotions, interpretations and possible actions;
- Analyse the issue by identifying advantages, disadvantages, threats and opportunities;
- Reflect on the group dynamics during the discussion.

Tip: depending on the available time, you could also each group to focus on one or more of the aspects listed on the teacher discussion guide to explore the issue at a deeper level. These different approaches can later be synthesised and discussed at the group level in Step 5 and revisited during the assessment.

5. From Awareness to Action

15 mins

Bring the group back together for a plenary discussion to share insights and reflect on the session:

- Raise awareness: Lead a discussion around similarities and differences in perspectives across the group, and how it felt to share and listen;
- Explore possibilities for change: Invite students to consider how they might use these insights moving forward, both personally and professionally.

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End the session by asking students to write a short reflection in their journal. Optionally, ask the students to submit a detailed self-reflection for assessment.

Tip: refer to the teacher discussion guide for guiding questions to support the discussion.

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III. Assessment

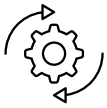
Students write a short self-reflection during or after class to monitor their openness and learning mindset. This can be a one-time self-assessment or part of a continuous feedback cycle to strengthen these skills through practice. For deeper learning, students can submit a more detailed reflection in their online learning journal via the university's platform, supporting both internalisation and personal growth.

Purpose

Assessment *of* learning (summative assessment) aims to evaluate the extent to which students have achieved the intended learning outcomes.

Roles

Self-assessment



Characteristics

Portfolio

Materials

Reflective questions

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Assessment

Reflective questions

1. What was your most significant insight from this exercise?
Reflect on the Volcano activity. What did it reveal about the issue or topic, the diversity of perspectives and the influence of personal backgrounds and experiences on those views?

2. How did this exercise help you make sense of the issue or topic?
Consider the insights shared by your classmates. What connections, patterns or underlying themes emerged? How did engaging with different perspectives enhance or shift your understanding of the topic?

3. What did you learn about yourself during this process?
Reflect on your personal experience in relation to:
a) the class topic
b) participating in open dialogues on sensitive societal issues
c) embracing vulnerability as a pathway for growth

4. How did this exercise relate to the Inner Development Goal 'Openness & Learning Mindset'?
In what ways did the values of ‘Openness and Learning Mindset’ manifest during this exercise, both in your behaviour and within the group dynamics?

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Assessment

Criteria for evaluating reflective writing

Insight & understanding
The student demonstrates thoughtful reflection on the analysis of relevant societal or class issues — past, ongoing and emerging — using the stages of the Volcano metaphor.

Personal reflection
The student reflects on their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the issues discussed, showing self-awareness.

Engagement with differences
The student acknowledges differing perspectives and reflects on their experience of engaging in dialogue with others, including moments of vulnerability.

Connection to IDG framework
The student refers to the Inner Development Goal 'Openness and Learning Mindset' and connects it to their experience during the activity.

Clarity & effort
The reflection is written clearly, well-structured and demonstrates care and attention in responding to the reflection questions.

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IV. Key Advice

The **Volcano stages handout** (Step 1), **Vulcano poster** (Step 2) and **teacher discussion guide** (Steps 3, 4 and 5) can be downloaded below.

Keep students actively engaged by varying their working modes: begin with individual reflection and journal writing, move into small group discussions, then have students stand up, walk to the Volcano poster or posters to discuss and place their ideas, return to their groups for further dialogue and, finally, conclude with a full-class discussion.

This tool is typically used to explore societal change. However, it can easily be adapted to other umbrella themes, such as a specific academic discipline, shifting paradigms or broader dialogues around a chosen topic.

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Key Advice

Volcano stages

Depending on class size, draw a volcano on one or more large flip charts or posters and hang them on the wall. You can either mark all four stages on one large poster or use separate posters to represent each stage individually.

There are four volcano stages to discuss:

1. **Dormant Volcano**
   A volcano that is currently inactive but could become active again.
   Are there societal issues that seem to have faded but could re-emerge in the future?

2. **Active Volcano**
   A volcano with underground activity; something is stirring, but it's unclear if, or when, it will erupt.
   What issues are currently simmering beneath the surface in society?

3. **Erupting Volcano**
   A volcano that is actively erupting, causing visible and immediate consequences.

   What pressing societal issues are erupting now, creating conflict, disruption or transformation?

4. **Extinct Volcano**
   A volcano that erupted in the past but is now completely inactive.
   Which past societal issues have died out but left a lasting impact, either positive or negative?

Below are some sample volcano templates you can print or use as inspiration for each stage.

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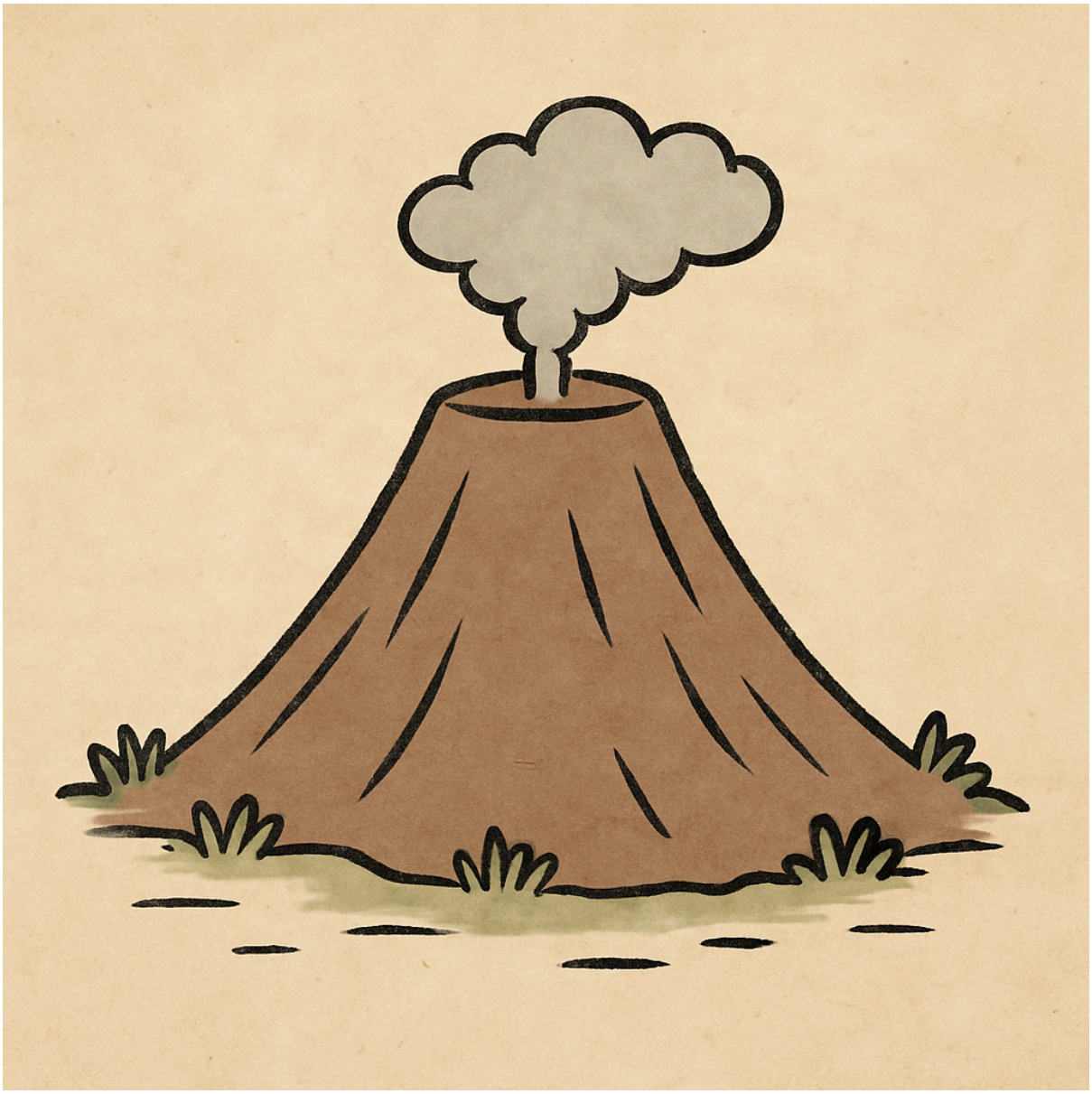
Dormant Volcano



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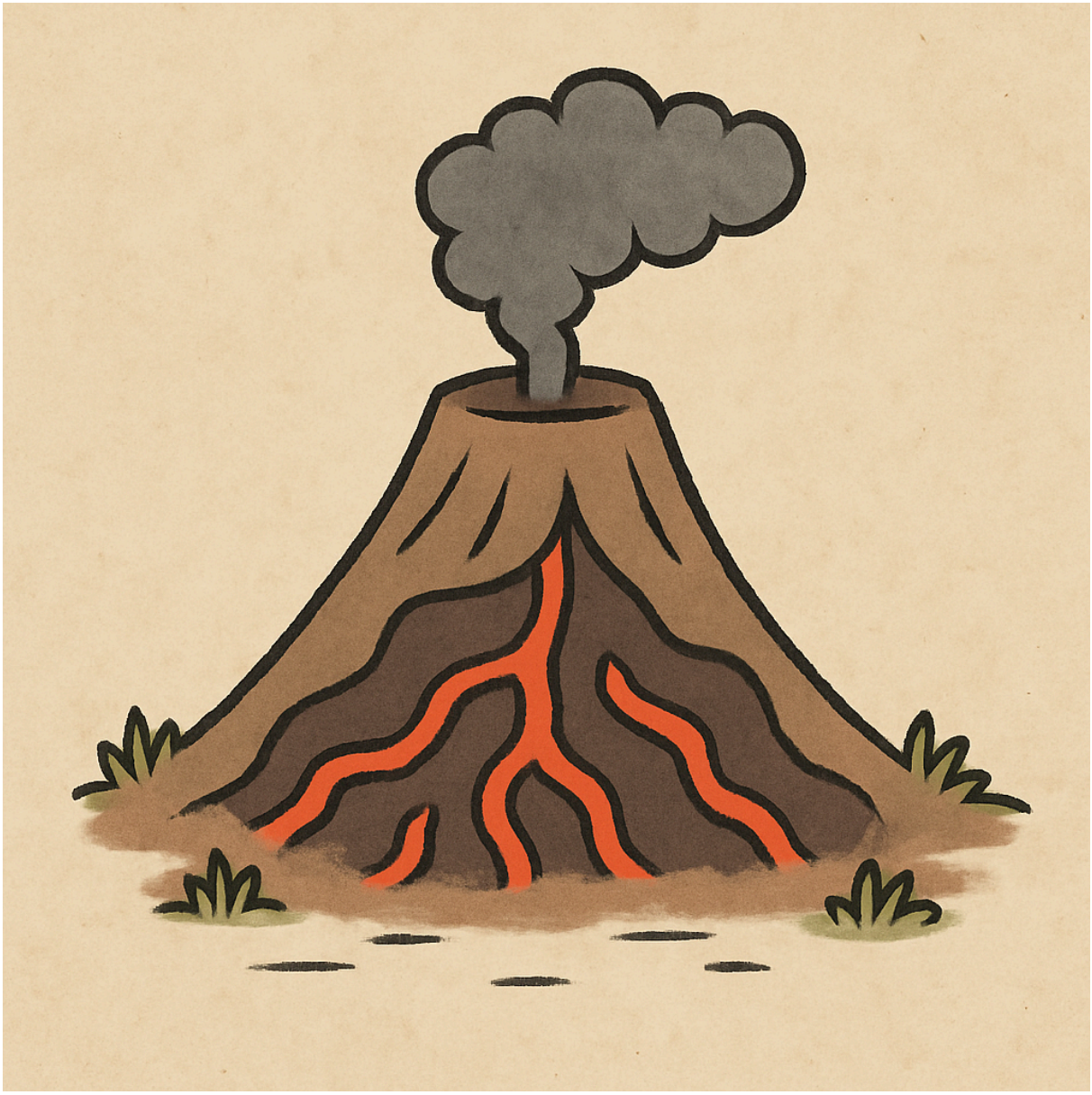
Active Volcano



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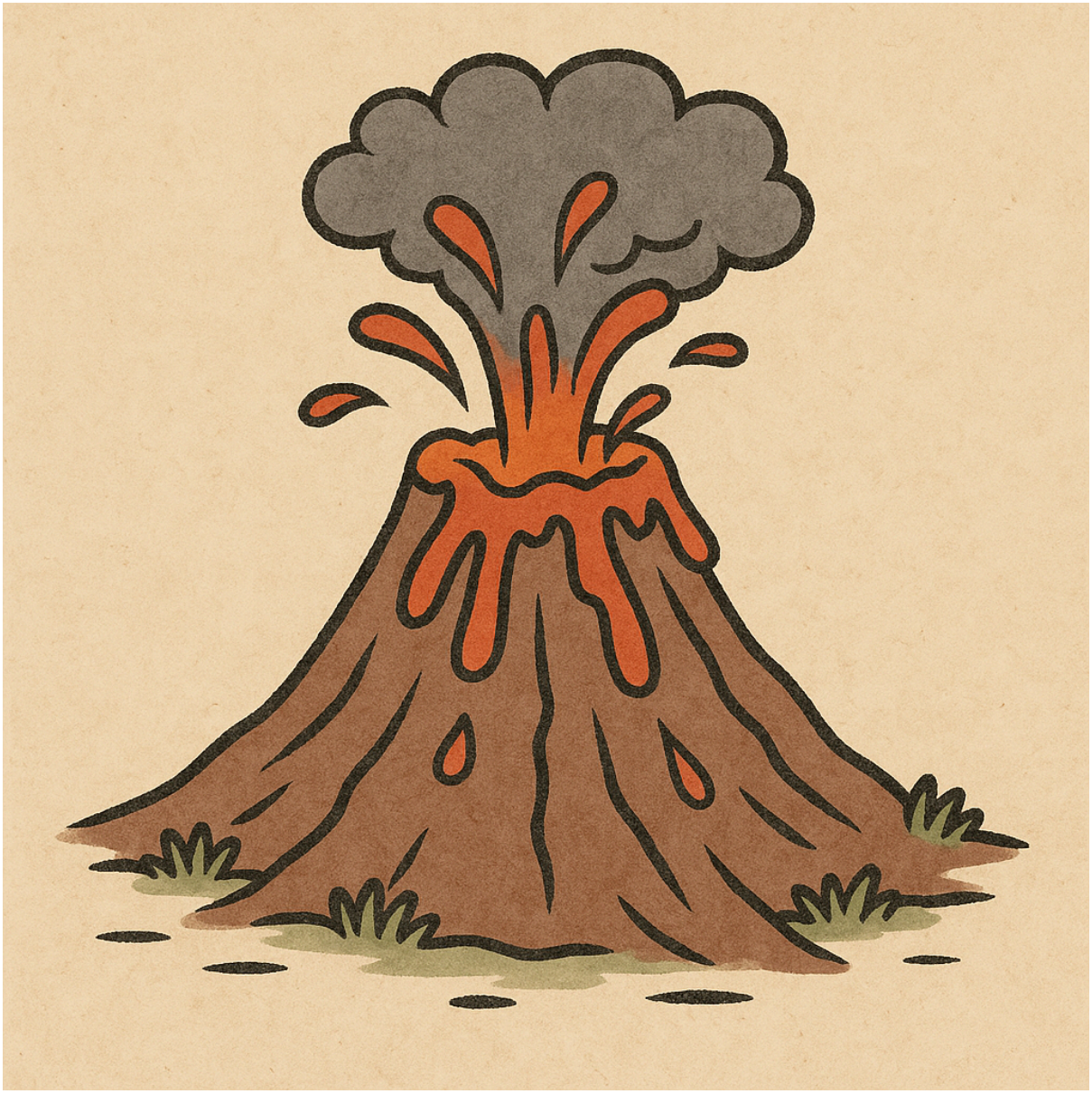
Erupting Volcano



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Extinct Volcano

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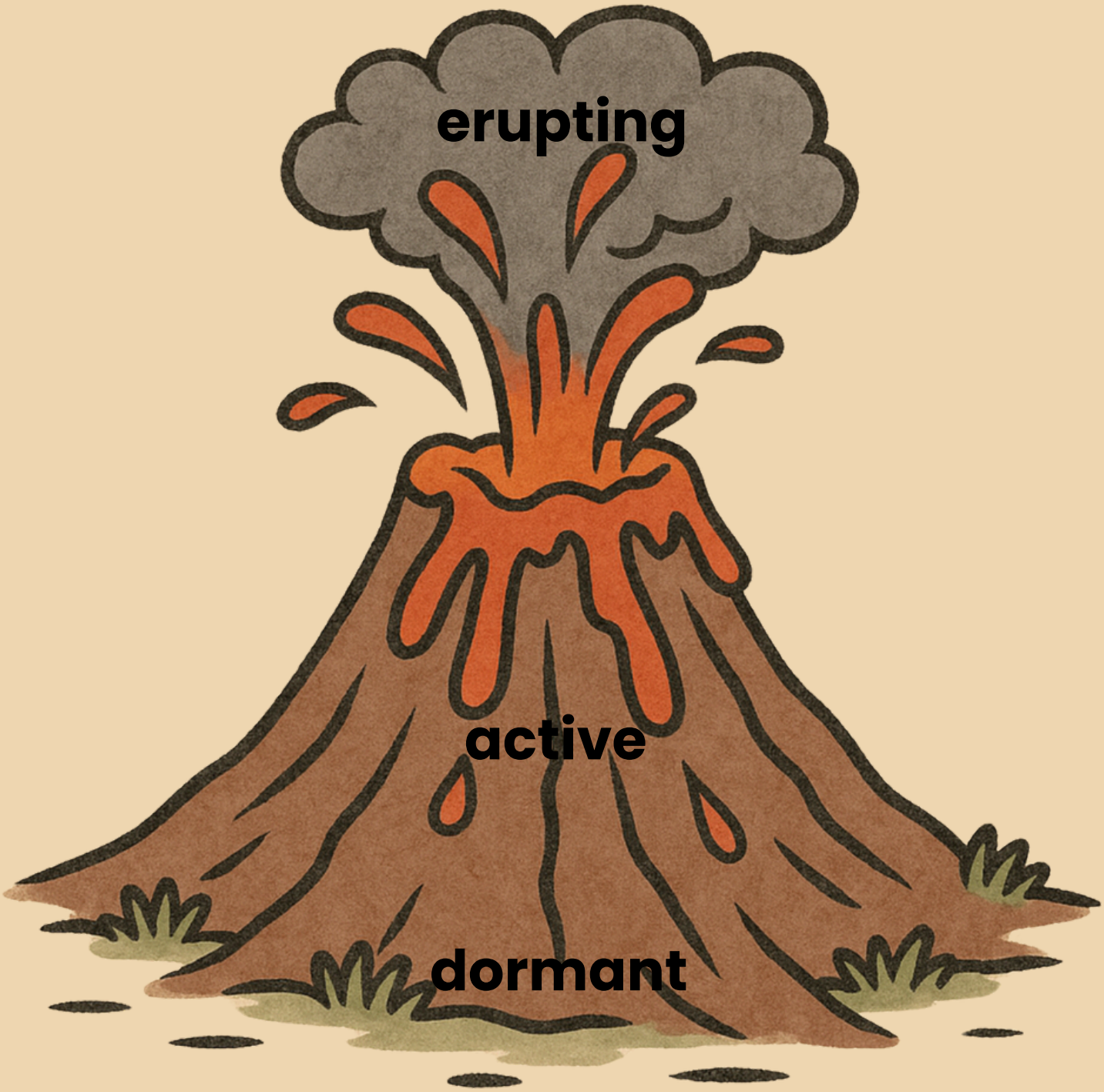

extinct

extinct

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Key Advice

Teacher discussion guide

These discussion and reflection questions can be posed directly during discussions, displayed on an accompanying PowerPoint slide or printed for each group of students to work through during their discussion.

Step 3: Making Sense of the Volcano Map (20 mins)
Sample questions and discussion points for the whole group:

Clarify (5 mins):

- Read through the issues together.
- Ask: Do we all understand these issues?
- Invite students to explain the unclear ones.
- Discuss whether any sticky notes need to be moved to a different place or whether new ones should be added. Are there any important issues missing from the volcano?

Reflect on group perspectives (10 mins):

- What stands out when you see the full picture?
- Which issue(s) surprise you and why?
- Are any issues placed in multiple areas of the volcano? What might this reveal about the nature or complexity of these issues?
- How do you feel seeing these issues? Which issues feel hopeful or troubling?
- How do these relate to the main topic of this class?
- What differences do you notice in how your peers placed issues on the volcano? What might these differences tell you?

Identify key themes (5 mins):

- Guide the group in identifying 3 to 4 major societal issues or trends that are now erupting.
- Ask: Do these represent positive or negative change?
- Encourage students to share different perspectives.

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Step 4: Group Reflection and Meaning-Making (20 mins)
Depending on the available time, you could assign each group to focus on one or more of the aspects listed below to explore the issue at a deeper level. These different approaches can later be synthesised and discussed at the group level in Step 5 and revisited during the assessment.

Contextual understanding

- Where does this issue come from? What is its history?
- Who are the groups or individuals most affected by it, and why?
- How is this issue shaped by current events, local or global?

Cultural & social perspectives

- How might different cultural or societal backgrounds influence your and/or other people's view on this issue and its urgency?
- Are there any norms, traditions or values that affect how the issue is discussed or addressed? Or how you will address it?
- What biases or assumptions might exist in your own or others' perspectives?

Personal positioning

- How does your background influence the way you see this issue?
- How comfortable are you talking about this issue? What makes it sensitive, personal or distant to you?
- What are you learning about your values or priorities through this conversation?

Communication & dialogue

- What differences in perspective emerged during your discussion?
- Where might these differences come from?
- How comfortable do you feel expressing your thoughts, feelings and concerns?
- Did sharing make you feel vulnerable? Why or why not?

Dynamic systems thinking

- How are the different issues discussed today connected? Are there hidden layers?
- If your issue were to "erupt" or escalate, what might be the wider or later consequences?
- What kinds of change (positive or negative) might happen if this issue were addressed or ignored?
- How could you, or others around you, help create positive change on this issue?

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Step 5: From Awareness to Action (15 mins)
Raise Awareness: Lead a discussion around similarities and differences in perspectives across the group, and how it felt to share and listen.

Guiding questions could be:

- What differences and similarities emerged between students' perspectives on societal issues?
- Where do you think these differences come from?
- Were there contextual or cultural influences discussed that you hadn't considered earlier about this issue?
- How did it feel sharing your thoughts and emotions on sensitive topics with others?

Explore possibilities for change: Invite students to consider how they might use these insights moving forward, both personally and professionally.

Guiding questions could be:

- Why is it important to discuss these issues in class?
- How can you use what you've learned in your group project or personal work?
- How might you engage with complex, multi-layered issues in the future?

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V. References

Institute of Cultural Affairs United Kingdom (ICA-UK). Facilitation and Learning Resources: Technology of Participation (ToP) Methods.
https://ica-uk.org.uk/facilitation-learning-resources/

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