

5. Professional ethics of EDC/HRE teachers: three principles

If students come to an EDC/HRE class with their own opinions, and all of them come away from it with the teacher's point of view, this usually points to a problem. EDC/HRE teachers must take care not to press their students to adopt certain views or values that teachers personally adhere to. Schools are public institutions, and parents, and society as a whole, expect teachers not to abuse their power to indoctrinate their children.

The professional ethics of EDC/HRE teachers are therefore crucial to the success, and even the justification of EDC/HRE as part of the school curriculum. They may be summed up under the following three principles, originating from a debate on this issue in Germany during the 1970s.¹⁹

5.1 Principle of non-indoctrination

The teacher must not attempt to indoctrinate the students in any way to make them adopt a desired opinion, for example in terms of political correctness. Therefore the teacher should not silence or "overwhelm" any student by superior arguing. Rather, the students should judge freely without any interference or obstruction. Any attempt by the teacher to indoctrinate her or his students is incompatible with EDC/HRE and its objective of educating citizens who are capable and willing to participate in an open society and a free, pluralist democracy.

5.1.1 Practical implications

The teacher should therefore chair discussions in EDC/HRE classes, but not take part in them. On the other hand, if students ask their teacher for his or her view on a matter, we advise the teacher to express it. The students know that as a citizen, the teacher has a personal political standpoint like any other citizen, and quite often they are interested to hear it. Then the teacher should make clear that he or she is speaking not in a professional role, but as a citizen. Indeed the student may consider it somewhat strange if their EDC/HRE teacher remained a kind of political neuter, while the students are permanently expected to express their views.

A teacher committed to human rights may well suffer if a student expresses views that show leanings to racism, nationalism or any kind of fundamentalism. The teacher should refrain from overwhelming such students by superior argument, but rather try to understand why a young person has adopted such a line of thought and find ways to challenge the students to think differently and in non-conventional ways.

5.2 Principle of controversial discussion

Whatever is a controversial issue in science or politics must be presented as such in EDC/HRE classes. This principle is closely linked to that of non-indoctrination: if differing points of view are omitted and alternative options are ignored, EDC/HRE is on the way to indoctrination. EDC/HRE classrooms should allow for complexity, controversy and even contradictions. For example, even though human rights are universal, individual rights can actually be in conflict with one another.

In a pluralist society, disagreement, differing values and competing interests are the rule, not the exception, and therefore students must learn how to deal with controversy. In democracy, debate and discussion are the medium for solving problems and resolving conflicts. Agreement and a certain degree of harmony through compromise is the result of negotiation. Enforced harmony without open discussion simply suggests suppression.

5.2.1 Practical implications

In EDC/HRE, the teacher must therefore at least present two points of view on an issue. An equal balance (for example, in the length of texts) is important.

19. See "Der Beutelsbacher Konsens" (www.lpb-bw.de).

In plenary discussions, the teacher should welcome differing points of view among the students. If one position is voiced only by a minority – or even no student at all – the teacher should adopt this view for argument's sake, clearly stating that she or he is enacting a particular role, not expressing a personal opinion. The teacher should take care to adapt his or her power of argument to that of the students.

5.3 Empowering students to promote their interests

Students must be able to analyse a political situation and to identify their interests, and to find ways and means to influence such a situation in favour of their interests. This objective requires students to be well trained in skills and competences of taking action and participation. It may only be achieved if the two other principles of non-indoctrination and controversial discussion are observed. This principle must not be misunderstood as encouraging egoism and neglect of responsibility. Every community relies on these values, but the point here is that the teacher must not discourage students from promoting their interests by confronting them with calls to observe their duties and responsibilities.

5.3.1 Practical implications

School is a micro-society where the students learn how to participate. This can be done in many ways, beginning in class, allowing students to choose topics that interest them and to participate in lesson planning, and include more advanced forms like democratic school governance (teaching through democracy and human rights) and taking action.

Task and problem-based learning support students in developing their powers of independent judgment and decision making.