

7. The method carries the message: task-based learning in EDC/HRE

7.1 The shortcomings of traditional citizenship education

In traditional content-based teaching, citizenship education focused on giving the students facts and information about the country’s institutional framework. The contents were more or less “timeless” and could be taught and tested systematically. From the student’s point of view, however, there was little difference between memorising facts about parliament or the different species of freshwater fish – “learnt” for the test today, forgotten tomorrow. Such a teaching approach adds very little to educating citizens in democratic, human rights-based communities.

7.2 Teaching though and for democracy and human rights requires active learning

In EDC/HRE, information on the country’s political system has a purpose – it enables students to take part in it (teaching “for” democracy and human rights). However, political participation requires training and experience. Therefore, in EDC/HRE, the method must carry the message. Teaching “about” democracy and human rights needs to be supported by the way students learn – teaching “through” democracy and human rights. Students need learning settings that support interactive, constructivist learning and competence training. In short, students must be active and interact – so teachers must allow them to get busy and to communicate.

7.3 Tasks – the teacher's tool to support active learning

From the teacher’s point of view, carefully designed tasks are the main tools to support active processes of learning. In designing or adapting learning tasks, a teacher takes into account all major aspects of teaching and learning: the structure of contents and learning objectives, the students’ initial levels of achievement, understanding and skill, learning opportunities, media, and the working atmosphere in class.

EDC/HRE is essentially organised as task-based learning. Volumes II-VI give many demonstrations and descriptions of task-based learning – integrated into a sequence of four lessons to allow realistic planning. Task-based learning falls into three basic categories: simulation of reality, exploration of reality and production. The following table gives some examples for these categories.

Task-based learning		
Simulation of reality in class	Exploration and taking action in real-life situations	Production
Role plays	Interviewing an expert	Presentation
Decision-making games	Interviews in the street	Handout
Playing statues	Surveys and research	Poster
Conferences	Internship	Flyer
Talk shows	Job shadowing	Wall newspaper
Debates	Case studies	Video or music clip
Hearings	Taking part in school government	Internet site
Tribunals	Taking part in lesson planning	Presentation
		Report: news of the week
		Exhibitions
		Portfolios
Skills training		

7.4 Task-based learning is problem-based learning

Experience has shown that students greatly appreciate the liberty they enjoy in such settings, and the trust the teacher places in them to use the time efficiently. Students only learn to take responsibility if they are given the liberty to do so. The risk of failure is always present – but without risk, there is no progress. Moreover, the students may achieve results that do not meet the teacher's expectations, but the teacher gains valuable insights into the students' level of competence development and their future learning needs. The process of learning is as important as the result.

In task-based learning, the students face problems – not only related to content and subject matter, but also in organising their work. They must become aware of them, and find a solution on their own. Due to this challenge of solving problems, every form of task-based learning offers rich potential for skills training, for example time management, work planning, co-operating in teams, obtaining materials and selecting information, finding and using tools, etc. Task-based learning is flexible, as students can adapt the task to their abilities.

7.5 The teacher's roles in task-based learning sequences

Task-based learning comes close to adult life – we all must cope without a teacher or coach at our side. The teacher should take care not to spoil this big learning opportunity by intervening too soon or too much. The teacher acts as a coach or trainer rather than in the traditional role of a lecturer and examiner.

- The teacher watches how the students cope with the problems they encounter, and should not give in quickly to any calls to deliver the solutions. The teacher's role is rather to give hints and make the task somewhat easier, if necessary. But to a certain degree, the students should “suffer” – as they will in real life.
- The teacher observes the students at work, with two different perspectives of assessment in mind – the process of learning and the achievements at work.²² Students at work deliver first-hand raw material for the assessment of the students' learning needs. While the students are working, the teacher takes the first steps in planning future EDC/HRE lesson sequences.
- The teacher can also offer to be “used” as a source of information on demand, briefing a group on a question that needs to be answered quickly. The roles are reversed – the students decide when and on what topic they want to hear an input from their teacher.

7.6 Active learning requires a follow-up

Task-based learning must be reflected, and also may require an immediate debriefing, for example if the students have strong feelings – joy, disappointment, anger – after a role play.

In a plenary session chaired by the teacher, the students share their ideas and reflect their activity. What have we learned? How have we learned? For what purpose have we learned? Without this reflection effort, task-based learning is merely action for its own sake. In terms of constructivist learning, the reflective follow-up is the time for abstract and systematic analysis and judgment. The teacher can give instruction – concepts, additional information – for which the task-based learning activity has provided the context.

22. See Part 2, Unit 5, Work file 3: Perspectives and forms of assessment, in this volume.