

Understanding politics

Work file 2: How can I support my students in judging political issues?

The core objective of EDC/HRE is to enable students to take part in their community and in politics. To take action in this way, the students must know what they want to achieve; objectives and strategies of political participation rest on analysis and judgment.

How can EDC/HRE teachers therefore support their students in judging political issues? Students permanently judge issues and decisions, perhaps emotionally, perhaps intuitively. How can the students develop a more reflected approach to political judgment?

What criteria are appropriate for political judgment?

The same case story that has already been used in the preceding work file is used as an example to demonstrate how criteria in political judgment may be set in contrast and balanced. By using the same case story, the two work files show how a political topic may be analysed from different perspectives. Political judgment focuses on the dimension of political issues (see the preceding work file), probing it in more depth.

A case story

A small town in a rural area has one school that serves not only students who live in the town, but also up to 20 km away. They use a bus service to shuttle between their homes and school. The municipal government supports families with a low income, particularly if they have two or more children at school. The families receive a relief on the bus fare, ranging from 25% to 75%.

The economic crisis has now led to a sharp drop in tax revenues. The representatives in the municipal parliament are now discussing how spending can be cut to avoid financing by credits as far as possible. Some influential politicians and commentators have suggested reducing the bus fare allowance, or even cutting it completely. They argue that the total spending cuts are considerable, but it is spread among many families who would hardly “feel the pinch”. But many parents disagree with this view and want the system of family allowances to stay as it is.

This case story is fictitious, but probably quite typical for the discussions on reducing public spending in times of economic recession. How is the issue to be judged?

The local government must attempt to achieve two objectives that are difficult to achieve at the same time.

1. Families with low income need support; this implies that a certain amount of the budget is reserved for family benefits.
2. The government must address the problem of falling tax revenues in a period of economic recession; this raises the question to what extent spending, including family benefits, should be reduced.

The objectives are in conflict with each other because their ways of achievement mutually exclude each other. While the first requires spending, the second requires saving. The way out – financing by debt – has serious undesired consequences. It provides short-term relief, but the interest payments, plus paying back the credit loan, tends to strangle public finances. Moreover, credit financing may add to inflation.

Two basic criteria for judging political decisions

In a democratic state, not only political leaders, but also citizens should judge the options in decision making. Only then will citizens be able to support or to oppose the decisions made by the government.

We may conceive political judgment as a process of constructivist thinking that resembles an inner debate. Different inner speakers propose different values or principles that lead to different decisions. The individual is like a judge who listens to all the speakers, balances or prioritises their arguments and then passes a verdict that opens up a path of action. We may imagine an ideal-type inner debate on the political issue about family allowances like this.

First speaker

Our community is devoted to human rights and has integrated many of them in our constitution. They include the right to education³⁰ and to an adequate standard of living.³¹ Families in particular enjoy the protection of the state. Families serve society as a whole by taking responsibility for the upbringing of the young generation. Therefore we are bound by obligation to care particularly for families living on low incomes. I therefore demand that the allowances for school bus fares remain untouched, particularly in these difficult times.

Second speaker

Taking responsibility for the community means that we must identify the problems and dangers that threaten us and make sure that we solve them. In the medium run, we cannot spend more than we earn. If our tax revenue goes down, so must our spending. We are doing the families a favour if we finance their allowances through credits. All of them, and particularly their children, will have to repay their part, plus the interest. An efficient solution of our finance problem will serve everyone. I therefore request that spending be reduced to the extent that credit spending can be avoided, and ask the families to contribute their part.

More speakers can take the “inner floor”, expressing further basic points of view. A third speaker, for example, considers the desired and undesired long-term impact of a decision, for example, in terms of sustainability. What is the impact on the planet, the interests and living conditions of the next generation, on economic growth, or on social groups at the bottom of the social ladder?

Two basic perspectives of political judgment

The first two speakers argued for different understandings of responsibility. The first speaker’s definition of responsibility was normative, based on the value system of human rights. Poverty is a serious violation of human dignity, and therefore the state must not reduce support for low-income families. The second speaker’s definition of responsibility was not values based, but purpose based. The efficient solution of an urgent problem is important, and no taboos are acceptable to distract from this priority.

The third addresses aspects of both in considering the long-term consequences of a decision.

Put in simple words, people want to be treated as humans by authority and have a say in how the country is run (first speaker), and they want to be governed well and efficiently (second speaker).

Discussions may lead to a dead end if speakers resort to different points of reference, such as values and purpose. Both points are justified in their way, but they do not meet unless linked by judgment.

Political judgment in EDC/HRE classes

In school, students exercise their freedom of thought and opinion.³² Students who have listened to their inner debate are therefore free in their decision. The teacher should not intervene as a further speaker in this process of judgment and give his or her view on the “right” decision;³³ in democratic

30. Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (20 March 1952), Article 2.

31. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948), Article 25.

32. Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989), Articles 13, 14; European Convention on Human Rights (4 November 1950), Articles 9, 10.

33. See the work file on the EDC/HRE teacher’s professional ethics in this volume.

politics, no-one possesses absolute standards of judgment to define the right decision. In particular, the teacher should not moralise or urge the students to take action in a certain way, or even to take action at all. This remains for the students to decide, not the teacher.

The students are therefore free in their choice of criteria. In reflecting their political judgment, they should become aware of them. This is a big step forward, compared with judgments based on emotions or intuition (“good” and “bad”). At an even more advanced level, they can give reasons for their choice of criteria.

However, the students should realise that in politics decisions must be made, and in effect, not judging amounts to a decision as well. Therefore, it is not enough for them to listen to their inner debate and dismiss their speakers without deciding which decision to make. Basically, when considering conflicting objectives as in the case here, the students may:

- prioritise, that is, decide to keep up family allowances or adopt a policy of tight spending cuts;
- find a compromise: in this case, this would amount to mild cuts in family allowances and moderate credit spending; by thinking more carefully how to spend a smaller budget in a way that those who help most still receive it gives technical details a new significance in the light of human rights.

Different methods, but not all, support the students in carefully thinking about questions of political judgment. They include:

- plenary sessions – critical thinking, debates and discussions;
- written work with feedback by the teacher;
- task-based learning followed up by a phase of debriefing and discussion.

The topics that the teacher chooses should allow convincing choices of controversial views and be within the students’ reach, that is, not too complicated. Current issues arouse the students’ interests, but are more difficult as both teachers and students act as pioneers.