

Toolbox for teachers

Tool 3: Chairing plenary sessions (discussion and critical thinking) in EDC/HRE classes

Introduction

Students share their thoughts and ideas, guided by their teacher. That is all. The setting is simple, and it requires only a blackboard or flipchart, but the teacher's task is a demanding one. Plato's "Socratic dialogues" mark the long tradition of this mode of teaching, and Socrates focused on problematising and deconstructing his partner's false or dogmatic views. We suggest a role more fitting for a teacher in EDC/HRE – a more supportive one like that of a coach. The aspect of competence development – students learn how to think and share their thoughts – is a goal as important as the contents.

The students are engaged in a process of thinking and interactive constructivist learning. The teacher supports them. Generally speaking, thinking is the effort to link the concrete to the abstract. Plenary sessions train the students' ability to think. Thinking takes time. Careful students are often slow thinkers.

Only school can offer guided plenary sessions as a format of learning. Like a teacher's lecture, it can be adapted precisely to the learner's needs, much more so than any textbook or video. Critics have rightly pointed out the abuse of this format: it is applied too often, and too long; teachers ask questions that students are uninterested in and unable to answer; teachers enact a crude Socratic type of role, treating students as inferiors who are expected to deliver what the teacher wants to hear.

But if used thoughtfully, and with a certain amount of practice, plenary sessions are one of the most powerful and flexible, and indeed indispensable, learning formats in EDC/HRE. The following checklist outlines the learning potentials and gives the teacher some tips what to do and what to avoid. Volumes II-V in this EDC/HRE edition offer numerous descriptions of plenary sessions with students and students from elementary to upper secondary level. Therefore no example is included in this tool.

The students' role

The students:

- enter the session with some expertise – on different levels, and they are interested in the topic under discussion;
- know that their contribution is welcome, and no grades are given for "wrong" ideas or suggestions;
- have the lion's share of the speaking time;
- have different learning needs (example: "slow thinkers" – "fast talkers").

The teachers' role

The teacher:

- communicates with the class, and is able and willing to improvise, reacting to whatever the students say;
- fully grasps the topic and has a clear idea of the outcome of the session;
- controls, but does not dominate, the plenary session, taking a small share of speaking time;
- gives the students sufficient time to think;
- listens without taking notes;

- listens actively, “fleshing out” ideas that students hint at;
- encourages students to participate and addresses students who tend to stay silent;
- acts as time keeper, group manager, process manager;
- gives structure to the discussion by using the blackboard (preferable to a flipchart), offering images, symbols, examples, information, concepts and frameworks;
- identifies the students’ learning needs and reacts accordingly. He or she instructs students on matters they do not know, and makes sure that arguments and lines of thought that are wrong or incomplete are criticised and deconstructed by a student or the teacher.

Suitable topics and contexts in EDC/HRE

Suitable topics include:

- working with student inputs (questions, comments, presentations, homework, experience and feelings);
- working with teacher inputs (question, prompt, picture, lecture);
- introduction of a new concept;
- follow-up to a reading or research task;
- follow-up to a phase of task- or problem-based learning (debriefing, reflection);
- feedback;
- developing a hypothesis for further research.

Learning potential

The students:

- create the context for a new concept that the teacher delivers by instruction (constructivist learning);
- experience how thinking takes place – asking questions, carefully considering answers, linking the concrete to the abstract and vice versa (competence development through demonstrations of analytical thinking and critical judgment);
- students share their criteria for judgment and reflect the reasons for their choice of criteria (competence of judgment or interactive constructivist learning);
- experience their class as a learning micro-community in which they are encouraged to participate (learning through democracy and human rights);
- are addressed as experts (strengthening self-esteem);
- pass judgment after having considered controversial views on a political issue (simulation of political decision making).

Preparation

Criteria for choosing a topic:

- The students must be informed on the topic (links to students’ expertise).
- The students see why the topic is worth discussing (relevance, personal interest).
- Controversy: the topic poses a problem and allows the students to take different views; the teacher has a personal view, but is not in possession of “the correct solution”.

- The teacher has a matrix in mind that allows her or him to anticipate most of what the students are likely to say and to integrate their ideas into a conceptual framework (for example, pros and cons, criteria of fairness and efficiency, concrete and abstract, interests and compromise).
- If the discussion does not begin with a student input, the teacher thinks about the starter (a question or a prompt, for example).
- The teacher drafts the summary of the session – for example a diagram with a new concept, a thesis, or a set of keywords that the students work out into a text as a follow-up homework task.

Some "do's"

- When you give a prompt or ask a question, give your students time to think – wait for several seconds. Then give the floor to several students in succession.
- Variants (they require more time, but greatly improve the quality of student and teacher inputs): when you give a prompt or ask a question:
 - give your students time to write down their ideas, and then let them have the floor; the students read their statements, or collect their written ideas on the floor or a poster and cluster them;
 - let your students share their ideas in pairs, and then let them present their results.
- Basic rule: "One teacher input – many student responses." In terms of time management, this may already be the whole plenary session, rounded off by the teacher's summary or conclusion.
- Make sure your students are seated in a square or circle, allowing everyone to address and to see each other.
- Make sure the students can understand each other. Encourage them to explain their ideas and any terminology that other students do not know.

Some "don'ts"

Avoid:

- asking yes/no questions. You will then have to ask the next one immediately after. Prefer open questions or prompts. Follow-up questions can then be tighter and more specific;
- getting drawn into a discussion with one or two students. Rather, pass on their questions to the class;
- side-stepping or ignoring statements by students that catch you unprepared. They may be the most interesting ones! Here again, get the class involved;
- commenting on every single statement by students that you agree or disagree with. Rather, give a prompt to help students identify strengths or weaknesses in each other's arguments;
- restricting your role to calling on students in the order of their showing hands. Quite often, students will address different aspects and sub-topics, and the discussion may slip into confusion or chaos. Therefore, take the initiative and decide or suggest which topic to focus on first. Point out the dilemma that time and concentration is too limited to discuss everything if students question the need to prioritise.

The teacher as improviser – students spark off a discussion

So far, we have considered plenary sessions that the teacher has included in planning an EDC/HRE lesson.

However, students may ask for a discussion spontaneously, often by making an observation or comment that sparks off a controversy. If ever time allows, the teacher should give the students the

opportunity to go ahead. Their learning needs are apparent – they, or at least some of them, are interested in an issue.

Examples:

- “In the end, you can only rely on your family.”
- “I think for some people the death penalty would be a good idea.”
- “What happens to politicians who break their election promises?”
- A student refers to a current issue from the daily news.

In such a situation, the students set their teacher a task. She or he must chair a discussion without prior preparation, by improvisation only. Teachers need not be afraid of such a situation. Usually the teacher will have a grasp of the topic, and the modes of interaction are the same as in any plenary session included in a lesson plan. A similar situation arises when the students ask a teacher to deliver an explanation unprepared (“what does democracy mean?”).

Here are some tips on how to react in spontaneous discussions:

- Ask the student(s) who started the discussion to explain the issue to the class. This gives everyone the chance to take part, and gives you time to think as well.
- Clarify how much time you want to set aside. Decide how to continue with the topic(s) and the lesson after the discussion.
- When you listen to your students, watch out for what they know and have, or have not, understood.
- Take the initiative to deliver a summary or conclusion of the discussion. This may not be of the same quality as one that you have had time to think about beforehand, but it serves the students better than ending a discussion without at least a preliminary statement on why it was held and what it led to.
- Alternatively, you can set this as a follow-up task for your students, but only if you have a solution in mind.