

Materials for teachers 2.3

Liberty and responsibility – three lecture modules

This is a set of lecture modules to choose from in response to the students' learning needs – both within the four-lesson unit, or in an optional extension of the unit. The modules explore the conditions of taking responsibility in our modern societies:

Module No. 1: Learning how to take responsibility is impossible without taking risks.

Module No. 2: How do we succeed in taking responsibility in modern, increasingly complex societies that stretch most of us to our limits?

Module No. 3: The stability of democratic communities has a cultural dimension – a shared set of values among its members that cannot be enforced, but that must be agreed on.

1. The risk–responsibility dilemma

Making choices freely is a human right, but this liberty carries responsibilities. We must always be aware of the impact and consequences that our decisions and actions have for ourselves or for others, today and in the future, here or elsewhere in the world. (See the sustainability model in \approx student handout 4.2).

On the other hand, we only learn how to take responsibility under conditions of liberty, which includes the liberty to fail. For example, young people want to go out at night and at weekends, as the students will know very well. Their parents expect them to be back at home at a certain time, and it is the young person's responsibility to keep to the agreement. Without the liberty to move freely, and to run all the risks involved, no one can learn how to take responsibility.

2. The complexity–democracy dilemma

In this unit, the students reflect on how to take responsibility in everyday situations. We must often decide in seconds how to solve a dilemma. The key task (lessons 2 and 3) allows the students to analyse the dimensions of responsibility in slow motion, and in this way, they train their intuition. Taking responsibility requires the skill to run through complex situations in seconds and then intuitively make a decision that will stand critical reflection. In our everyday experience, this is “normal”, and we are all aware of the risk of making mistakes when we must decide on difficult matters under time pressure. Training and experience helps to improve intuition, but the problem remains.

Complexity takes on a different quality on a social or global level. For example, we often have the choice how to travel from A to B, for instance from our homes to school. Driving by car is the most convenient option, while taking the bus or cycling takes longer, not to mention possible delays, getting wet in rainy weather, etc. What choice do we make? One criterion could be the consequences of driving for climate change. But would my car alone make such a difference, particularly if only a minority takes the bus or bicycle? The issue is too complex for an individual to handle (see unit 4). The same applies when we have to take part in political debates on such an issue – are we doing enough, or the right things, to avert climate change?

This increase in complexity is typical for modern societies. They are linked through globalised markets and depend on each other in the way they deal with global issues like climate change. Having to cope with complexity makes it more difficult to take responsibility. This is, in a way, the price we have to pay for the increase in our standard of living in modern societies, due to their achievements in science, technology, and education.

Intuition no longer helps us in taking responsibility in complex issues such as dealing with climate change. We need advice from experts. In democracies, citizens and politicians who must rely on experts to understand the world they are living in are in danger of slipping into a kind of modern, post-democratic oligarchy, a rule by experts whom the citizens can no longer control. This is the complexity–democracy dilemma.

Democracy stands and falls with the promise that every interested citizen can take part in decision making. To do so with responsibility requires educated citizens. Education is the only chance that we have to resolve the complexity dilemma. The expansion of education has not only been a driving force of increasing complexity in modern society, but is also the key to overcoming the complexity–democracy dilemma.

3. The liberty–stability dilemma: liberty, pluralism and our need to share certain values

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948); full text in ↗ student handout 2.5.

Individuals who exercise these rights produce pluralism in many forms (see unit 3). One effect is that people adhere to different religious beliefs and value systems – even more so if immigrant communities are present. Modern societies are secular and pluralist – their members develop individual standpoints and identities (see unit 1). Responsibility has a constructivist dimension.

On the other hand, every community relies on a set of values that all members agree on. Democracy equally depends on a strong state and a supportive political culture.

This is the liberty–stability dilemma: a democratic and secular state depends on cultural conditions that its institutions and authorities cannot produce or enforce. A set of collectively accepted and appreciated values, rules and goals cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it is the citizens' responsibility to (re)negotiate and (re)define their values, rules and goals. Education, and EDC/HRE in particular, play a key role in meeting this challenge. Human rights offer perhaps the only set of rules and principles that may be universally accepted (see lesson 4 of this unit, which focuses on Article 1, UDHR). Human rights emphasise the principle of mutual recognition – the golden rule – but do not promote any particular religious belief or philosophy of ethics and morals. From this perspective, human rights are not only at the source of the problem, but also the key to the solution.