

Lesson 1

"Our most urgent problem is ..."

A discussion on political agenda setting

This matrix sums up the information a teacher needs to plan and deliver the lesson.

Competence training refers directly to EDC/HRE.

The learning objective indicates what students know and understand.

The student task(s), together with the method, form the core element of the learning process.

The materials checklist supports lesson preparation.

The time budget gives a rough guideline for the teacher's time management.

Competence training	Judgment: making a choice, giving reasons. Participation: mutual recognition of personal experience, interests and values.
Learning objective	A political problem is an issue, not a fact. It is urgent, requiring action. It affects the community. As many different interests, ideologies and values are involved, it is an issue whether a problem should be admitted to the political agenda. In a democracy, the citizens participating in such debates exercise their freedom of thought and expression. The media also strongly influence agenda setting (freedom of the press).
Student tasks	The students carry out a discussion on political agenda setting.
Materials and resources	Flipchart and markers in assorted colours, scotch tape.
Method	The "wall of silence" – group work. Presentations and discussion.
Time budget	1. The wall of silence. 15 min
	2. Presentations. 10 min
	3. Reflection; introduction to research task. 15 min

Information box

The "wall of silence" is a brainstorming method that supports students who are less extrovert or wish to take some time to think carefully before saying something. Working in silence helps the students to concentrate, and their statements will become more interesting and meaningful. The "wall of silence" is an example of the paradox that a strict framework of rules supports liberty rather than obstructing it. The students act in the role of experts; they cannot give a "wrong" answer to the key question.

The students simulate a public debate on political agenda setting in the classroom. Their experience helps them to understand the policy cycle model better, as the agenda-setting debate is the first phase in the policy cycle model.

They deliver material that they can study more extensively in the research task (lessons 2 and 3). The constructivist approach corresponds to the constructivist method of defining and solving political problems in democracies, as it is modelled by the policy cycle.

Lesson description

1. The “wall of silence”¹⁷

The students form groups of five. Each group is seated in a semicircle facing a flipchart fixed to the wall. Each group has two or three markers in different colours. They work in silence. Within the time limit of 10 minutes, each student makes a minimum contribution of one statement. He or she completes the sentence:

“In my opinion, our most urgent problem is ...”

The students respond to sentences or words already written down, and they may write as much and as often as they want. The group is given a second sheet of flipchart paper if required. The students may also link statements, using arrows or lines and symbols like question or exclamation marks. Their poster will provide a record of their discussion.

The teacher follows the discussion from a distance. He/she does not intervene or take part in the silent debate, but rather makes sure that the rules – particularly working in silence – are observed by the students.

2. Presentation

After the time limit for writing on the poster has expired, the posters should be visible for all students. The students assemble around the posters in two big semicircles. Taking turns, the groups present their posters to the class. Each student has chosen a sentence he/she has not written and reads it to the class, followed by a brief explanation for this choice. Quite often the students focus on one or two statements. No discussion should take place before all students from all groups have spoken.

The teacher collects the students’ statements under general headings in a chart on the blackboard or flipchart, depending on the students’ inputs. Here is an example:

Our most urgent problem is ...				
Economy	Security	Environment	Society	...
Fight unemployment	Car accidents	Reduce CO ₂ emissions	Improve schools	...
More jobs for young people	Support for young women	
...			...	

The teacher can hand this job over to a student. The presenters and the class participate in choosing new categories and deciding where to put which entry.

3. Reflection

The “wall of silence” simulates political agenda setting. So what has priority in the students’ opinion? Can the class agree on a problem that deserves priority? The chart helps the students to answer this question. It shows whether the students emphasise issues under a particular category, and if the entries can be linked (see economy in the example above).

But the students may not be willing to agree on one issue. But must they? This is a question worth thinking about.

17. Source: *Teaching Democracy*, EDC/HRE, Volume VI, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg 2008, Exercise 7.1, p. 62.

On the one hand, they live in a free country. They are free to choose whichever issue they consider important and promote it in public. On the other hand, resources are scarce – this is not only a question of taxpayers' money and funds, but also one of time and energy, and last but not least, public attention. Many people can only cope with a very limited number of issues at a time, and tend to lose interest quickly; some media serve and increase the tendency towards a “one-issue agenda”.

The students may also feel that this process of agenda setting is unfair or even “stupid”, as the issues they consider really important fail to receive the attention they deserve. Who corrects these “wrong” decisions?

The answer is – the students themselves, if they think something should be done. In a way, they are forming parties that have different goals and values (“ideologies”), which are permanent protagonists in agenda-setting debates (e.g. workers, environmentalists, minority rights activists).

This discussion opens an interesting path to understanding what purpose parties serve. See the suggestion for an extended research task at the end of this chapter.

4. Research task

But once this has been said, the students can follow their own path of interest. The teacher informs the class that they will have the opportunity to study in detail an issue of their choice. To prepare the research task, the students should therefore collect material from print or electronic media on the issue of their choice. They should not only look for agenda-setting debates, but collect all the information they can find on decisions being made or implemented, statistical data, statements by political parties, lobbies, NGOs, etc.