

Materials for teachers 8.1

Why freedom depends on framing by rules and laws

Learning opportunities in this unit

Interdependence through scarcity of time

The most precious resource of teaching and learning, and in our lives generally, is time. As professionals, teachers must constantly answer the question on how the available time in class may best be used – and in interactive learning, the students take responsibility for this. The advance organiser in this unit will only work if the students accept their responsibility to use the time for reading each other's materials when it is there – before the first lesson. In the first lesson, no more than 10 minutes can be given to the four groups to choose an issue for the debate. If they have failed to read the materials in advance, the class will have one good idea less to choose from – this is an example of how we depend on each other (interdependence).

Strict rules protect liberty of speech

A debate must take place within a fixed amount of time. All speakers enjoy the same rights of free thought and free expression. The available speaking time must therefore be distributed fairly – which means equally, one minute per statement. It seems paradoxical that strict rules are necessary and useful to protect our liberty. The time limit works in two ways: our share of speaking time is guaranteed, and it is fair. On the other hand, it confines every speaker to a short time slot, and speakers must think carefully about what they want to say. They must focus on key arguments, leave out everything of minor importance, and make their point clearly and briefly.

Freedom and framing

The students' liberty of action and speech is framed, or limited and defined, in two ways. First, by the available learning time – the lessons are over after 40 minutes or so, and the debate must fit into one lesson and take no more than 20 minutes, as other things need to be done in that lesson as well. Second, the debating rules give each speaker a fair, but strictly limited time slot of one minute per statement. Framing has a structural dimension – time is scarce throughout our lives – and a political, man-made dimension: rules set frames without which we could not enjoy our liberties without violating the rights of others. Scarcity of time is not negotiable, but framing by rules is.

School is life

The dialectics of freedom and framing, rooted in the universal scarcity of time, occurs in school as it does in public life. Here, in a very literal sense indeed, school is life.