

Chapter 1 – Building up classroom atmosphere



Introduction

The picture shows students working in the classroom. To the left, a boy and a girl are working together, their materials, including a globe, on the table. They seem to be engaged in discussion. In the background, a student or perhaps a teacher is giving a presentation. The girl to the right has her hand raised waiting to be called. Everyone in class is working hard and seems to be enjoying it. Classroom atmosphere is crucial for effective work and learning.

These five exercises focus on how to create, or restore, an atmosphere in class that allows students to feel comfortable and safe. This basic requirement supports efficiency of teaching and learning, as disruptions invariably take priority and consume time and energy.

EDC/HRE has much in common with good teaching. This does not only apply to these five models, but to all the exercises in this book.

These models have not, however, primarily been conceived as tools of class management; they carry a deeper, more meaningful message. Educational reform today is, to a considerable extent, an issue of how to move forward from delivering a fixed, seemingly timeless set of knowledge and insights towards a more dynamic concept of lifelong learning that requires competence building rather than the accumulation of facts and figures. From this perspective, school is conceived as a micro-society – a place where students encounter experiences and problems that have much in common with adult life. Students should therefore learn how to deal with such problems in school. These exercises help students to make their micro-society work by getting to know others, agreeing on rules within a group, sharing personal experience with others and building self-esteem, defining one's own identity within a group and co-operating with others. These tasks are equally important and suitable for young and older students, but the level of reflection will vary.

Finally, in terms of EDC/HRE, these exercises carry a clear message of teaching *through* or *in* the spirit of democracy and human rights. Each student is an individual who contributes something personal and special to the community of students and teachers in class. Each student should be treated with interest and respect. Every rule should be applied equally to everyone. This means: "What I expect from others they may expect from me." The students should be made aware of this message, so reflection and critical thinking in class are essential.

Exercise 1.1. – Matching cards

Educational objective	This exercise enables students to make contact with others in a non-threatening way.
Note on use	Teachers can use this exercise to assess the learning needs and expectations of their student group.
Resources	A set of cards that form pairs.

Procedure

1. The teacher gives out the cards randomly and asks the students to find their other half.
2. When they have found each other, the students spend 5-10 minutes finding out some basic information about each other:
 - their name
 - their family
 - where they live
 - their favourite animal or pop group or football team or colour, etc.
3. The students return to the plenary. Each student has the opportunity to briefly introduce their partner to the rest of the group.¹
4. The students are seated in a circle of chairs. In order to generate some feedback, the teacher encourages the students to comment on what was new to them or what struck them in particular.

Extension

This activity can be developed further by asking, at primary school level for example, all those students whose favourite colour is red to get together, so that small discussion groups can be formed.

Variation

The students explore different ways of presenting their information, for instance through mime, by making a poster “advertising” their partner or by writing a poem.

Materials

A set of cards on which is written and drawn an object which has a partner on another card.

The cards should show writing and pictures which will enable younger students and those with learning difficulties to take full part in the exercise.

rose – thorn	day – night	knife – fork	shoe – sock
light – dark	salt – pepper	pen – paper	table – chair
hot – cold	high – low	strong – weak	up – down
on – off	open – closed	big – small	fast – slow
clean – dirty	rough – smooth	stop – go	start – finish
good – bad	yes – no	friend – enemy	fat – thin
sun – moon	brother – sister	boy – girl	

¹ This needs to be explained when introducing the exercise so that students can choose how much they want to disclose about themselves.

Exercise 1.2. – Rights, responsibilities and rules in the classroom

Educational objectives	<p>This activity introduces a “step-by-step” approach to use with students in order to establish democratically agreed rules for their class group.</p> <p>The students experience that their contribution matters and that they have a chance to influence the drafting of the rules. They develop a sense of “ownership” and experience active participation in the setting of the class community as a micro-society.</p> <p>The students become aware of links between rights, responsibilities and rules (standing for laws in the classroom context).</p>
Resources	Large sheets of paper divided into three equal parts.

Procedure

1. Using a group-forming “game” (e.g. by handing out matching cards to form groups of jugglers, violinists, etc.) the class is divided into three, six, or nine groups depending on the class size. There should be no more than five students in each group. Each group is either A, B or C.
2. Each group appoints a spokesperson. The teacher asks the groups for brief feedback – how did they choose their spokesperson?
3. Each group has a sheet of paper divided into three. Using the top third of the paper, they record what they believe to be the rights of every individual (including the teacher) in their class. They should record every suggestion and each suggestion should be numbered.
4. The students give feedback, guided by the following questions. How well do you think you have completed the task? What were you all doing that helped? What hindered?
5. The students pass their work on to the next group (A to B, B to C, C to A).
6. Each group considers the list of rights generated by the previous group, guided by the following questions. What responsibilities do we have in order to respect those rights? What do we need to do? How do we need to behave? For example: “Everyone has the right to be heard.” – “We have a responsibility to listen.”
Using the same numbers as used in the rights section, the students write down a corresponding responsibility (if they can think of one) in the middle third of the paper.²
7. Teacher input: rules for rules.
 - Decide on a few rules that will be prominently displayed in the classroom.
 - They should be positively phrased – DO something rather than DON’T do something.
 - They must be specific and describe the required behaviour, e.g. the right to be heard; we have a *responsibility* to listen; *rule* – remain silent when others are speaking.
8. The students pass their sheet of paper on once again. The groups consider all the information from the previous two groups and agree on a maximum of five rules. These are written in bold letters on the final third of the paper. This set of rules is detached and stuck on a wall. Each group’s spokesperson explains their rules to the whole class.
Teacher-led discussion. The students identify redundant rules and agree which duplicate(s) can be deleted. Some groups may not be willing to allow their submission to be deleted,

² Students sometimes find it difficult to find a responsibility for every right.

while others may. The students should try to reach a decision that everyone agrees to. Rather than excluding a group's work, duplicates can be retained for further consideration.

9. Voting for the rules. Each student has four tokens to "spend" on the rules that they believe should be included in their classroom. They can cast their vote by allocating their tokens in any way they wish; for example they may wish to cast all of their votes for one rule or spread them evenly. The four rules with the highest number of votes cast become the rules for their classroom. They can be written up, signed by each student and displayed prominently in the classroom.
10. Reflection. What helped/hindered? How did you contribute to the activities? Did you notice anyone else in the class who did things that helped? What did they do?

This is the first opportunity for the class to apply their rules and to reinforce them. The teacher could praise those students who are respecting the rules. If at all possible the teacher should ignore those who are not, otherwise it provides them with "the limelight" for negative reasons.

Exercise 1.3. – Identity coat of arms

Educational objectives	Enhancement of self-esteem; individuals are encouraged to recognise and celebrate positive aspects of themselves. Groups find their common goals.
Note on use	This exercise allows the students to become actively involved very quickly. It is ideal in a newly set up learning group or at the beginning of a training session.
Resources	Coat of arms poster for each group of students, coloured pens or pencils, pictures from magazines, etc.

Procedure

1. Using a group-forming “game” (e.g. by handing out matching cards to form groups of jugglers, violinists, etc.) the class is divided into three, six, or nine groups depending on the class size. There should be no more than five students in each group. Each group is either A, B or C.
1. The students work in groups of four. Each student is given an outline of a coat of arms, which is divided into four sections and has a scroll beneath it. The parts may already be cut out from a second copy so that they can be glued on the main coat when finished.
2. Task:

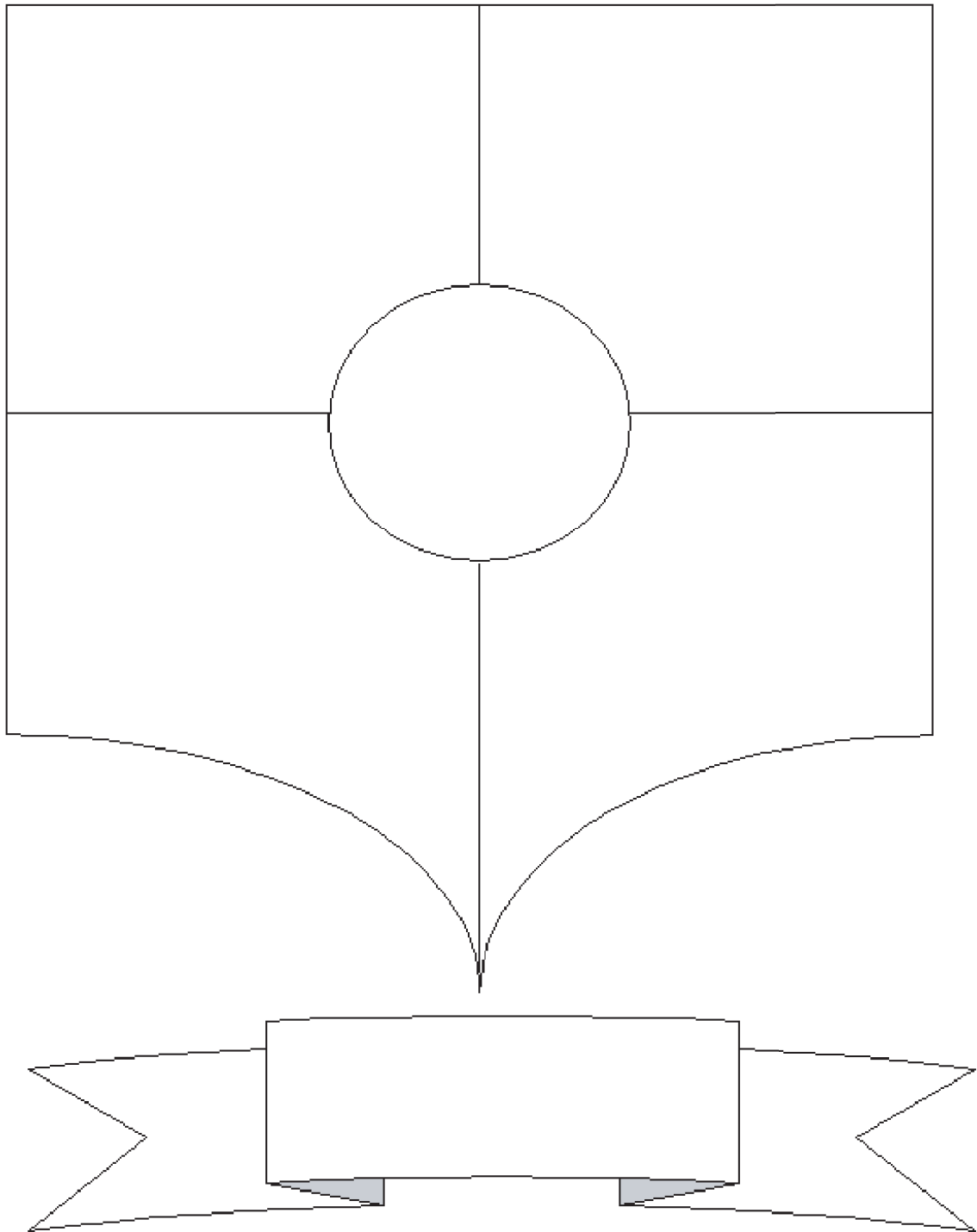
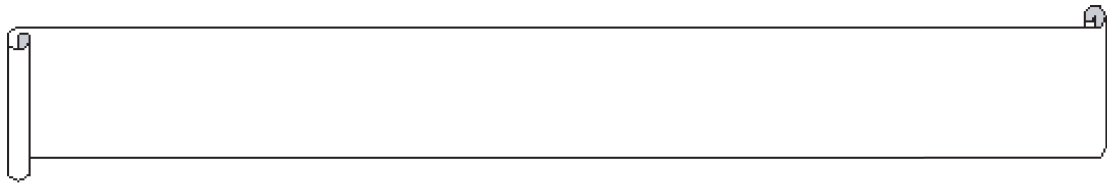
Individual preparation:

 - take notes answering the following questions:
 - How do you perceive yourself?
 - What do you need?
 - What are you capable of doing?
 - What do you regret when you think about your own life?
 - draw (or select) a symbol or symbols that represent your notes (colours, coloured paper, magazine pictures, etc.).

Group work:

 - explain your symbol(s) to your group members
 - glue all parts on your coat of arms
 - find a common symbol for your group (centre), a motto for your ideas (top flag) and a name for your group (bottom flag).
3. The completed coats of arms are presented by a group member to the plenary and are displayed alongside everyone else’s on the wall.

Materials



Exercise 1.4. – A bouquet of flowers

Educational objectives	The objective of the exercise is to support group cohesion and enhance self-esteem.
	The students appreciate that individuals in a group are unique and different, but also contribute to the overall strength of the group.
Resources	<p>A small portrait photograph of the student no bigger than 3 cm square (a drawn self-portrait is possible too).</p> <p>Yellow or orange paper cut into round pieces of approximately 6 cm diameter to create the centre of the flower.</p> <p>Paper in bright colours cut into the shape of petals, coloured ribbon, if at hand, markers or pencils in several colours, two large sheets of flipchart size paper, glue or other adhesive.</p>

Procedure

1. Each student has a round piece of paper onto which they stick their photograph.
2. Each student takes six petals and on each writes one or two positive words about:
 - what a teacher might say about them
 - what a male member of their family might say about them
 - what a female member of their family might say about them
 - what they say about themselves
 - what a friend might say about them
 - what somebody else in the room, school or community might say about them.
3. The student pastes the petals around the edge of the photograph to create a flower head.
4. The teacher or the students arrange each flower head on the display paper.
5. The teacher or the students draw the stems and leaves of each flower to create a bouquet. Attaching a bow of ribbon makes the bouquet look very special!

Extension

Sitting in a circle, the students give their comments. This helps the students to understand the symbolic meaning: the bouquet would lose its beauty if some flowers were missing (community); each flower is different and adds something unique (dignity of person); at the same time, all flowers are similar and therefore one is as important as the other (equality). The concepts in brackets may be included in classes with older students.

Exercise 1.5. – Chinese sticks

Educational objectives	The students are trained in the skills of team players. They experience what it means to have to depend on others, and others having to depend on them (interdependence).
Resources	Chinese sticks or pencils, biros, etc. (approximately 15 cm long).

Procedure

1. The class is divided into groups of about eight students. The groups are told that they are to cover a certain distance (if possible, the exercise should be done outside the school building).
2. The groups stand in lines, with a distance of about 1-1.5 metres between them.
3. The students take their Chinese sticks (or biros, pencils) between the tips of their forefingers. The sticks now link the students together.
4. Now the groups must race to a goal that has been set beforehand, for example the classroom or the other end of the schoolyard. If two students drop their stick, the whole team must return to the starting point and begin again from there. The teams are free to develop the best technique and strategy to move swiftly to the goal without dropping the sticks.

Depending on how difficult the task proves to be for the students, these rules can be applied more or less strictly.

Extension

1. Some students can act as external observers who can comment on the way the groups co-operated with each other.
2. The activities can be filmed to show different forms of behaviour.

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Illustration from Chapter 1

Democracy and Human Rights Education – Volume VI

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A collection of models for democratic citizenship and human rights education