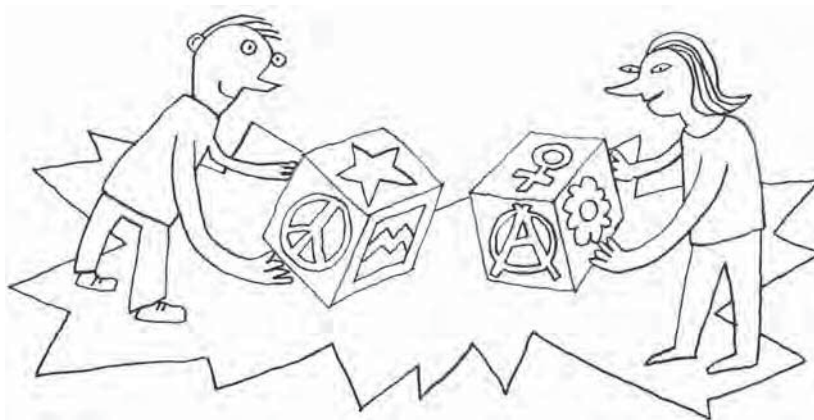


Chapter 6 – Understanding political philosophy



Introduction

The picture shows a boy and a girl facing each other. They are showing each other a cube with symbols that stand for political philosophies. It is important that they are smiling at each other, as the symbols differ and indicate controversy and disagreement. It is worth while exploring the meaning of the symbols, as far as this is possible. The boy shows the “ban the bomb” symbol, confessing to pacifism. The pentagram could stand for a Socialist point of view, but also for a holistic view of humankind in the universe. The zigzag lines may stand for water, as a symbol for protection of the environment, but the meaning could also be completely different. The girl shows the A-symbol of anarchism. The female gender symbol might stand for a feminist viewpoint. The flower could stand for the protection of the environment, or peace, but the girl may also have given this symbol a different meaning. The young people are making use of human rights – freedom of thought, freedom of expression and equality. There is no authority to decide who is right and who is wrong.

The picture carries an interesting and surprisingly complex message. We combine symbols and concepts in political philosophy to express our ideas and views, but they may be ambivalent or misleading. Therefore we must explain our choices to each other and we must listen carefully. There are many points on which we can agree or disagree. The six symbols suffice to give us an idea of an open, pluralistic society. We should treat each other with respect; then we can have a good argument that harms no one and benefits everyone.

Education for democratic citizenship and human rights (EDC/HRE) integrates two dimensions. The first is related to *content*. Understanding political philosophy is important in EDC/HRE, as it provides us with a sense of direction and values when we judge issues and take action. We also understand others better.

The second dimension of EDC/HRE refers to the *culture* of civilised conflict – arguing with a smile, if possible. Such a culture of conflict must be taught in school, by experience and reflection. This can begin at an early age and a lot depends on the example set by teachers and principals. The EDC/HRE teacher should take care to avoid two pitfalls. One is political correctness. It is not the teacher’s task to teach the students any preferred political doctrine, nor should he/she press them to accept his/her personal views. The second is silent neglect, which is a subtle form of oppression. Students should learn to expect and grant mutual attention and response. The teacher should encourage the students to explain their choices so that others can understand them, but they should not be pressed to justify them.

The exercises can be adapted to different age groups and may be used from elementary to upper secondary level.

Exercise 6.1. – Basic concepts of political thought

<p>Educational objectives</p>	<p>The students understand the values that implicitly guide political argument and debate and that some of these values support human rights, while others oppose them (teaching <i>about</i> human rights).</p> <p>The exercise trains students to be willing to study and understand values and attitudes regardless as to whether they agree with them or not (teaching <i>through</i> human rights).</p>
<p>Resources</p>	<p>A list of propositions or slogans (see materials below). Alternatively, election posters, video clips or excerpts from statements or speeches in political life could be used.</p>

Procedure

1. The students form pairs or groups of four.
2. They identify the implications of the statements. It may be necessary to provide them with questions to guide them and allow a comparison, e.g. for which groups in society a proposal may have implications and what these implications might be (the students would find answers such as the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the powerful and the weak, etc.).
3. If they have already been introduced to basic approaches of political thought, the students could link the proposals to the different schools of thought. They may find affinities to more than one line of thinking.
4. The students judge the statements and their underlying values in the light of human rights.

Extension

The students discuss the implications of the propositions by relating them to issues under discussion in their country.

Materials

List of propositions and slogans

1. The state should not interfere with the management of the economy. It should limit itself to enforcing the law.
2. Free medical care should be guaranteed.
3. All companies should be nationalised.
4. The head of state should be accorded full powers.
5. The state, the employers and the unions should meet to determine the rate of increase in wages.
6. The state in itself is a nuisance.
7. White civilisation is the superior civilisation.
8. Weak students should be prevented from slowing down others in their studies.
9. Nobody has the right to give other people orders.
10. Society should be organised so that the ruling order respects the natural hierarchy of things.

Exercise 6.2. – Attitudes to power⁵

Educational objectives	The students can distinguish between concepts of power and their implications for democracy and human rights. The students develop active listening (teaching <i>through</i> human rights).
Resources	Set of student handouts: “Statements on power and government”.

Procedure

1. The students form pairs. They study the statements and decide which statements they are in agreement with.
2. They make notes of the reasons why they support a certain statement.
3. The pairs present their results in class.
4. The students identify the underlying schools of political thought (transfer exercise); the teacher uses the findings and discussion in class to introduce the students to (selected) approaches of political thought (inductive approach, allowing different methods to be used – lecture by the teacher and perhaps the students; study of excerpts).

Extension

The students reflect on their individual value systems.

The students relate political ideas to the policies of parties and political leaders in their country.

Materials

(see next page)

5. Adapted from Claude Paris, *Ethique et Politique*, Editions C.G., Québec, 1985.

Student handout

Statements on power and government

1. In a government the role of the leader is paramount and irreplaceable.
2. Power alienates and must be eliminated in order to allow each person to realise his full potential.
3. A nation has only one dangerous enemy: its government.
4. Political power should be exercised by people chosen by the citizens.
5. Political parties are detrimental to the power of the state because they divide the people and cause futile confrontation.
6. The state is not a simple collection of individuals; it is a reality higher and more essential than the sum of individuals.
7. All forms of power have a tendency to become totalitarian.
8. The state is not an end in itself but the means necessary for the realisation of individual aspirations.
9. The state is an immense cemetery where all expressions of individual life end.
10. Strikes are a challenge to authority, which is why they should be forbidden.
11. Individuals exist only for the state and are nothing outside it.
12. Young people should take part in the decisions that concern them.
13. Only when the state has ceased to exist will we be able to talk of freedom.
14. The teacher should take the legitimate claims of his/her students into account.
15. Human beings have a natural tendency to do good; we should always have confidence in them.
16. The participation of all individuals in power should be a fundamental principle of the organisation of all human communities.
17. Political parties make it possible for the aspirations of citizens to influence the decisions of government.
18. Left to themselves without any control, human beings would kill one another.
19. Political power should not be at the mercy of public opinion.
20. Human beings have rights that power should respect and promote.

Exercise 6.3. – If I were a magician

Educational objectives	The students are encouraged to create meaningful visions. A person without utopian visions is confined to accepting the status quo. The students are given the chance to use their talents (creativity).
Resources	Paper and a marker pen.

Procedure

1. The students are asked to imagine themselves in the role of a magician.
2. They read:
 “If I were a great magician, I would arrange for men, women and children never again to live through what happened during the war, and for this to happen ...”
 Each student completes the following sentences:
 - I would stop ...
 - I would close ...
 - I would forget ...
 - I would oppose ...
 - I would continue ...
 - I would create ...
3. In turn, the students read out their answers in a plenary session. It is suggested that the chairs are arranged in a circle.
4. Evaluation: the students point out and discuss which desires and needs they have discovered.

Extension

The students deal with the question as to whether anything could be done to make one of their wishes come true.

Variation

For older students:

“If I were an architect ...”: the students imagine what their school, or the town or city they live in, could or should look like.

The students can reflect on their wishes and relate them to basic traditions of political thought (Liberal, Conservative, Socialist, Friends of the Earth).

Understanding political philosophy

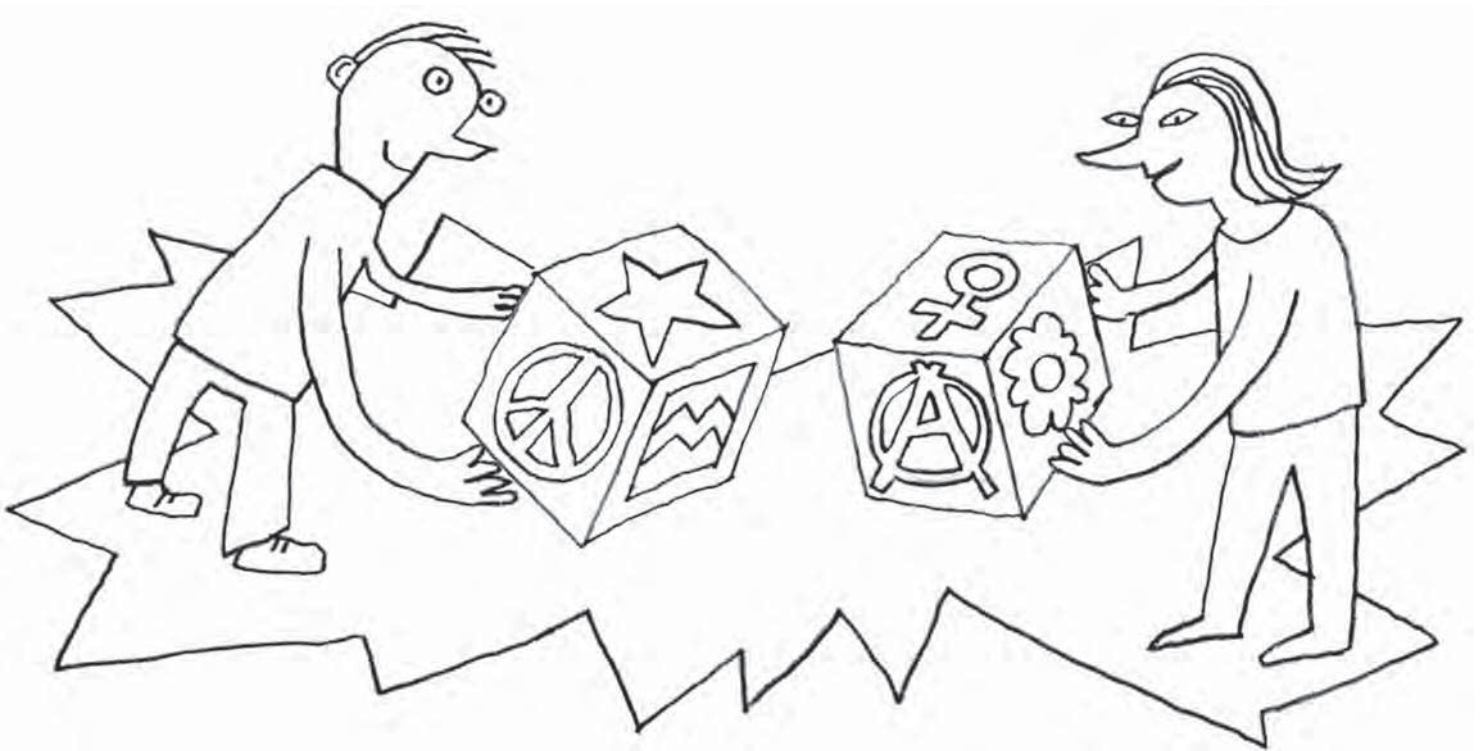


Illustration from Chapter 6

Democracy and Human Rights Education – Volume VI

Teaching democracy

A collection of models for democratic citizenship and human rights education