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CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

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## **Towards equality and positive identity: the value of classroom discussion as a teaching method**

*Eyrún María Rúnarsdóttir and Sigrún Adalbjarnardóttir  
Háskóli Íslands (Iceland)*

Citizenship education aims at cultivating students' awareness of such democratic values as justice, human rights, equality, and freedom (Adalbjarnardóttir, 2002; Hoge, 2002). This involves enhancing students' positive identity and feelings of responsibility and respect (Pecek, 2000). Theorists and practitioners have pointed out that in order to teach for democracy, the school must adopt democratic procedures into its classrooms and in the school as a whole (Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989). In that process active learning is emphasised (Clarke & Killeavy, 2000). Teaching methods that involve and engage students, such as team work, role-playing, research projects and classroom discussions, play an important role in citizenship education (Pecek, 2000).

Our focus in this paper is on classroom discussion around citizenship issues. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) claim that discussion is a method of 'dialogically-organised instruction'. To be effective it must include authentic questions from the teacher, rather than common test questions with known answers. It must also include follow-up questions and an evaluation in which the teacher validates students' responses and brings them into play in the discussion.

Theories about teaching and studies of classroom processes have focused largely on classroom discussions (e.g., Dixon, 2000; Maloch, 2002; Möller, 2002; Oser & Althof, 1993; Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989; Sigurgeirsson, 1994). Some have argued that discussions in the classroom provide students with a social foundation for learning (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997). In the discussion process the students and the teacher share ideas, create new ones and acquire new understandings and meanings. Studies have indicated that the discussion method is an effective way to promote students' social and ethical growth (Adalbjarnardóttir, 1993; Möller, 2002; Oser & Althof, 1993; Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989). Nevertheless, studies of teaching methods show that recitation is still a wide-spread method of teaching and that open dialogue is rare (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997; Sigurgeirsson, 1994).

Despite the rich tradition of studying classroom processes (Hammersley, 1993; Maloch, 2002; Steele, 2001) few studies focus on teachers' professional awareness in leading discussions around citizenship issues, or on discussions that aim at enhancing students' citizenship awareness as reflected in their critical thinking, social skills, and feelings of responsibility, respect and equality. One focus of our study is on the ways a teacher in an innovative programme reflects on his aims of leading discussions in the classroom. A second focus is the connection between his aims and his actual method of leading discussions around citizenship issues.

In addition, one of our aims in studying the way teachers lead classroom discussions was to add a new layer to the analytical tool on teacher professional development that Sigrún Adalbjarnardóttir and her colleagues (e.g., Adalbjarnardóttir, 2002; Adalbjarnardóttir & Selman, 1997) have been developing for several years. Up to now the development of this analytical tool has focused on teachers' reflections on their aims and teaching methods. It consists of three developmental dimensions that chart increased differentiation in the

teachers' reflections. These awareness dimensions range from focusing primarily on observable outcomes (such as students' class behaviour) to emphasising developmental processes (for example, students' improved ability to differentiate and coordinate various perspectives and to resolve conflicts, leading to active participation in society). In this study we take the first step in bringing the analytical tool into the classroom work.

### **The innovation programme**

The study was conducted in a secondary school in Reykjavík. The context was a first-year course called Life Skills. It was a part of an innovation programme for 16-year-old adolescents who need to strengthen their basic academic skills before beginning other courses. It was also designed for students who had negative attitudes towards further education. The key concept of the programme was equality; it aimed to prepare the students for life and work by providing them with the same opportunities other students have for becoming active citizens in a democratic society. The project's more specific aim was to enhance students' citizenship identity: to help them gain more positive feelings towards themselves as well as towards school and work. The focus was on promoting their beliefs in their own study skills and on fostering their social competence and skills.

The core course in Life Skills integrates issues from sociology, psychology, arts and philosophy. Another essential part of the course focuses on students' verbal and written expression and their learning skills. As the course name indicates, the focus is on enhancing various competencies and skills that are important in a democratic society. These include critical and autonomous thinking, active self-reflection, respect and tolerance towards other cultures, understanding democratic ways of dealing with issues, and being an active citizen.

### **The analytical tool of classroom discussions**

In Table 1, we show three different ways teachers lead classroom discussions. The first dimension for classroom discussion is based on direct teaching. The teacher uses mainly closed questions and looks for students' factual knowledge, derived from the curriculum material. For example, when a teacher comes closest to leading a discussion by asking the students to paraphrase the material verbally and by asking closed questions as she looks for facts from the material (from literature, history, social studies) we classify her ways of leading a discussion under the first dimension. This approach to classroom discussion has been called an elaborated form of recitation to distinguish it from an open dialogue (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997).

A teacher working in the second dimension uses open-ended questions and encourages the students to engage in dialogue with a focus on various perspectives. She follows their thinking with open questions, but states her own opinion clearly. A teacher working in the third dimension uses the same approach as in the second, but goes further in trusting the students' competence to make decisions effectively and responsibly, and to come to an agreement about conflicting points of views.

**Table 1 An analysis of different dimensions of aims and of classroom discussions**

Issues		
Dimensions	Aims	Classroom discussion
Externally- and/or internally-based reflection or action	Focus is on improving students' overt behaviour and/or classroom atmosphere for both the students and teacher. Short-term aims.	The classroom discussion is based on direct teaching. The teacher uses mainly closed questions and looks for students' factual knowledge from the curriculum material.
Integrated reflection or action	Focus is on enhancing students' citizenship identity and preparing them to participate actively in society but not in a contextualised way. Short- and long-term aims.	The teacher uses open-ended questions and encourages the students to engage in dialogue with a focus on various perspectives. She follows their thinking with open questions, but states her own opinion.
Integrated and context-based reflection or action	Focus is on enhancing students' citizenship identity and preparing them to participate actively in society. Reference to important individual life competencies and skills which are differentiated and contextualised. Short-term and long-term aims.	The teacher uses open-ended questions and encourages the students to engage in dialogue with a focus on various perspectives. She follows their thinking with open questions. She trusts the students' competence to make decisions effectively and responsibly, and to come to an agreement about conflicting points of view.

### **‘What is the meaning of the word freedom?’**

#### *Stefan leads a classroom discussion*

Our study is based on a qualitative methodology, so we can better understand the reality from the perspective of the actors themselves (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). We use in-depth interviewing and participant observation, the most widely used methods within qualitative research. In the study we explore how a male teacher, whom we call Stefan, leads classroom discussions around citizenship issues. He was one of the leading teachers in the innovation programme and had taught the course in Life Skills since the programme began three years earlier.

Eyrún Rúnarsdóttir collected the data for one school year by interviewing the teacher twice and observing ten lessons in which he led discussions. The interviews and the lessons were recorded and transcribed. It should be noted that the findings presented here are a part of a larger research project.

According to Stefan, classroom discussions are a very valuable way for a teacher to work towards various important aims. He claims that the discussion method creates a community within the class, activates students, promotes their autonomous thinking, and enhances their social skills. He also feels the method gives students a broader and deeper knowledge of the issues discussed and helps them better understand the context being explored. Furthermore, during classroom discussions students develop their critical thinking and their ability to evaluate social and political debates. Stefan states that discussions constitute quite a large proportion of his teaching.

Below we present the discussion the students had over the question Stefan raised, 'What is the meaning of the word freedom?' One student claimed it depends on the perspective one takes and provided an example of a point of view, that of slaves. Stefan followed up by asking what slaves can tell us about freedom and after some discussion he changed the focus with a new opening:

- Stefan: Here we have one person (makes drawings on the board). Here we have another and we keep a wall between them. Alright. Then this person comes over and hits the other one. Or the first person pushes the other one to the corner and says 'You are not allowed to go any further.' This person, Person A, has pushed the other one, B, to the corner and says, 'I will hit you if you go.' Which one of them has more freedom?
- Girl: This one, A. (Other students agree).
- Boy: Neither one, they are as free as they were in the beginning.
- Boy 2: Yes, she can say 'piss off' and run away, and do whatever she wants. She doesn't lack freedom.
- Stefan: Person A uses a constraint. But do you still think Person B doesn't lack freedom? Have I understood that correctly?
- Boy: Yes.
- Stefan: Why is that?
- Boy: What hindered her freedom?
- Boy 2: She can choose what to do.
- Boy: Yes, exactly.
- Stefan: Can she choose?
- Boy: She can choose whether she accepts the constraint or does something to challenge it.
- Stefan: She can choose how she handles the situation? So ...?
- Boy: She can choose whether to get free or not. She gets free if she does something about the constraint. She doesn't get free if she does nothing.

In this dialogue between the students and the teacher, the teacher puts forward a hypothetical example and follows it with open questions. This excerpt elicits a discussion session that has most of the characteristics of a classroom discussion outlined above. Stefan asks authentic open questions in order to create a discussion among his students and follows their thinking with new encouraging questions. Also of interest is that his choice of topic - the concept of freedom - is related to the concepts of democracy, justice and respect which are the core concepts in citizenship education. Stefan also uses a particular technique to explore the concept of freedom. He works from his students' ideas and thinking as a base for further discussion instead of stating his own understanding of the concept. This is clear when he asks for the meaning of the word freedom and keeps on working on his student's example of slaves.

Stefan's aim in the discussion session, however, is not only to increase students' awareness of the concept of freedom or to promote their self-esteem. He is clearly concerned with connecting the concept of freedom with responsibility in a meaningful way:

You are pretty good at existentialism: Existentialists say: 'It doesn't matter how constrained you are, you are always free. And you also always have responsibility.' You are free, for example, even though you don't urinate in the hallway. When you are free you need to watch out by being responsible in communication with other people. I don't urinate in the hallway because then I would go against other people's freedom. I think before I act.

It should be noted that most of the points Stefan summarises in this excerpt had already been addressed in the discussion. In other words, in exploring the meaning of freedom Stefan encouraged his students to connect it to responsibility and he worked towards the aim of increased awareness of responsibility in interpersonal relationships.

In the dialogue above Stefan actively listens to the students' responses and thinking, rephrases, and probes further (as in: Person A uses a constraint. But do you still think Person B doesn't lack freedom?). The way he leads the classroom discussion reflects his aim of encouraging students' autonomous thinking. He also sends the message that any view is worthy of attention and accordingly enhances the students' feelings of self-worth as well as respect for different opinions. We tend to classify Stefan's way of leading classroom discussion under the second dimension and even the third, as he uses open-ended questions and encourages the students to engage in dialogue with a focus on various perspectives in addition to following their thinking with open questions. Further we feel he 'trusts the students' competence to make decisions effectively and responsibly, and to come to an agreement about conflicting points of views' (see Table 1).

## Concerns

We would argue that the 'elaborated form of recitation' in classroom discussions that is reflected in the first dimension of the analytical tool (see Table 1) is less effective in promoting students' citizenship competencies and skills than discussions that focus on various perspectives (Adalbjarnardóttir, 1999). The latter method gives students more opportunities to critically evaluate issues under exploration and to exercise their autonomy and social and interpersonal skills, as well as their feeling of responsibility.

It is our hope that the analytical tool we are developing can be of help to teacher educators in their pre-service and in-service training, and to researchers into teachers' professional development, as well as to teachers reflecting on their own aims and practices for effective and responsible teaching.

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