

The Class Council – Democracy in Class

According to the recent Deutsche Shell's Jugendwerk report on German youth, young Germans are not generally apolitical. Young people have difficulties with politics, but the much bigger problem lies on the other side: it's that politics is reluctant to involve young people.[1] It's important to young people to have a say and to utilize their competence to contribute. Young people's wish list for school would include improvements like more small workgroups, more projects, more independent research by themselves, more classroom discussion, to have more say in class planning, a trustful relationship to their teachers.[2] The ways of teaching and learning mentioned by the young themselves promote cooperative learning and democratic skills.

The facts stated by the Shell report and representative surveys of the *Institut für Schulentwicklungsforschung* (IFS) indicate that teachers have to show more effort in promoting the process of democratization at school. Célestin Freinet's concept of a class council effectively pursues at least three goals of political education: young people gain democratic awareness, they improve their skills in making judgments themselves, and they practise getting involved. The class council is the democratic pillar upon which Freinet pedagogy stands.

How the Class Council Works

At its heart is the weekly class council session. The class council is about creating useful structures for this particular class, about contracts, obligations, dependability, observing agreements, developing sensitivity and tact, dealing with emotions and the disposition of time, about rules and people learning through their own insight and conviction, about developing responsibility. Liberty as well as rules and limits are necessary for a democratic classroom. Social equality is of vital importance. Every person in the classroom – no matter whether teacher or pupil – has to be treated with the same amount of politeness and respect. The teamwork is based on observing the rights and interests of others, and on standing up for your own rights. Hence, each member of the class council has one vote.

There are four offices: president, timekeeper, secretary, and referee. These jobs are allocated to different individuals from one class council session to the next. Thus, every pupil can get practice in the various tasks. This distribution of functions within the class council gives a secure basis for the management of discussions and for implementing the decisions which flow from them. It may prove helpful to provide little index cards for each function, summarizing the essential duties connected to it (see appendix, material 3).

They will remind council members of responsibilities and create clarity and transparency.

Taking over an office is always a challenge. Especially in younger classes, it is essential for each pupil to get practice in the various offices. In 5th and 6th grade, I emphasize training these offices within table groups (a table group consists of 5-6 children). By using a rotating procedure, every child gets the chance of practising every office repeatedly.

We always reserve five minutes at the end of the class council session lesson to talk about competences required for the respective offices. The class council discusses and passes any changes in the job descriptions. This creates a fertile atmosphere of both openness and structure. Developing a democratic style of leadership makes it easier to clarify roles, to distribute responsibility throughout the group in the form of clear targets and to ensure that power is sensibly used. Young people can experience power as something positive when it is

- defined and controlled in an open manner;

- limited in time;
- varying depending on the situation;
- distributed among several people.

The young people get the impression of reliability and certainty. Every one of them can rely on this infrastructure, i.e. these institutions safeguard also their own individual rights. I think that it is crucial for teachers to be aware of themselves as role models and thus to set a good example consciously. If the teacher frequently interrupts pupils, or if the teacher does not bother putting up the hand to signal that he or she is waiting for permission to make a contribution, then this acts as a bad signal to the children. It states that it is apparently not necessary to adhere to the rule “We hear everyone out.”

Freinet states in his “Essai de psychologie sensible”[3] that the spoken word can intensify the example, but that it is neither able to correct the example nor able to repress it. Teachers have to decide for themselves whether or not they (as adults) want to be a role model and good example, whether they act consistently with the demanded goal of sharing power.

The Agenda

There is an agenda, which is agreed upon by the class together with the secretary and the president. I collect the issues for discussion in a class council journal; colleagues of mine use posters that they put up on a classroom wall for this. At the beginning of a class council session, all the prospective points on the agenda are read aloud and additional points are appended if desired. Here is an example from the class 9C:

1. Meet the new classmate!
2. Individual development of performance
3. Problems in the physics/chemistry course
4. Final field trip

A class teacher often has to introduce additional points to the class council, here for example the point “Individual development of performance.“ From 9th grade on, young people in Germany have to start preparing themselves more systematically for their secondary school graduation. When looking through my class notes, I notice that many of the pupils have problems in assessing their abilities. That is why I suggest this point for discussion in the class council.

[Caption for a possible photo of two young people having a vivid discussion: *Having a decent argument is also part of a well-functioning democracy!*]

Procedures for Discussion and Making Decisions

Pupils intensively learn and practise assessing their own abilities, as well as reflecting on standards and values in actual arguments. This approach is based on the didactic assumption that you can't develop power of judgement by simply *adopting* an idea. The confrontation with reasons others regard as important requires participants to reflect, to quarrel, and to state their own position in a more differentiated way. An excerpt from the agenda item “Self-organization of the final class field trip” shows this:

Angelika presides, Rafael watches the time, Marcel is referee, and Sarah takes minutes. The class council session begins with each student writing down the advantages of a self-organized trip on one index card and their concerns on another. We collect and shuffle the cards. Each one draws a card – if it happens to be one's own card, it is returned to the box

and a different card is drawn instead. Following that, every card is read aloud. Then there is a phase in which council members try to reduce the concerns.

Concerns:

- *Some will have to do everything while others will do nothing except moaning afterwards.*
- *We won't pull it off since this class isn't disciplined enough.*
- *We won't manage to call the travel agent to sort out all the problems.*
- *Since we're underage, we can't book tickets or do anything else alone.*
- *It surely won't work if we try to manage without the teacher!*
- *We'll forget stuff, not all of us will be asked about their wishes.*
- *Prices won't be paid enough attention to – that might make it too expensive.*
- *There will be the pressure to solve problems alone.*
- *Will every pupil be able to pay?*

Advantages:

- *We will succeed in booking the trip.*
- *It would have a favorable effect, because we will see what it means to organize a trip on our own.*
- *I'm already thinking as a team.*
- *Our parents can help.*
- *We can decide ourselves, so there won't be no complaining.*

Reading out all opinions in this neutral manner (since the one reading it out is never the author of the concern) creates a relaxed class atmosphere. This enables the pupils to eagerly discuss the pros and cons in a disciplined way. The final vote shows an overwhelming majority in favour of self-organization.

The Result

Instead of a confrontation settled by voting, a common agreement is reached after an intensive topic-oriented debate. Democratic awareness grows in the same way as the individual qualities and interests of each pupil are consciously noticed. The participants are encouraged to deal with each other in order to find solutions acceptable to everyone. These young people are in an advanced state of group development where the social structure is determined by acceptance, esteem, a sense of belonging, open communication and relaxation.

As the class teacher, it is my task to point out the various ways of voting. In the given example, a decision by consensus has to be reached in order to be able to continue working in a constructive manner. In other situations, majority decisions are made by absolute majority, two-thirds majority, or qualified majority.

Two things are to be kept in mind: one has to determine whether a decision of consensus or a majority decision has to be made. In addition, it is important not to overwhelm the group, as democratic awareness of young people to make decisions by consensus will only start to thrive in an advanced stage of the group. Nevertheless, the making of consensus decisions has to be repeatedly practised by facing specific issues and problems related to the real life of the students. We normally use the following procedure to pass a resolution:

1. preliminary vote: resolution passes if unanimous
2. if the outcome is unclear: the minority may state their point of view

3. debate
4. final vote using simple or qualified majority as deciding factor

The class council is a model for education that brings about a higher grade of democratization within the class by involving all students. This democratization is caused by both structural implementation and a different attitude that enables them to really participate in shaping classwork and to take over responsibility.

Problems in their own little world

For illustration purposes, I will give more details about the discussion about financing a school trip mentioned above since this discussion proved to be a crucial experience for us. Referring to the financing of the final field trip in 10th grade, Sebastian gave reports on the current estimate of costs:

At the beginning of the school year, a travel agent provides a detailed estimate for the trip: the trip costs 244 Euro, board and lodgings inclusive but excluding allowances and excursions. At first, there is an awkward silence, then the first reactions emerge: “I get enough allowance, should be no problem.” – “How’s that going to work? I don’t get an allowance as big as that and my parents sure won’t give me more.” – “Perhaps your relatives can help?” – “Nah, I guess I just won’t be able to go on the trip.” – “My brother has a field trip this year as well, we just can’t afford it.” – “What about getting a job?” – “We have to solve this together as a class!” The students experience the social problem of different monetary backgrounds in their own midst. Will they show team spirit and reconcile their individual interests with the ones of the group? What kind of quality decisions will they make? For several sessions, we follow the discussion process and realize how the initial focal point shifts away from a selfish perspective and the search of substitutes like relatives or jobs. The egotistic point of view makes way for one involving solidarity. We as a group are responsible for success or failure of our project.

I am so fascinated by the way the discussion proceeds over several meetings that I can’t really tell where the turning point is. In the final vote it is decided that the class as a whole will tackle the financing problems – as far as I remember, only three or four students vote against it or abstain. A rough estimate shows that in order to solve the problem, each student has to earn 35-50 Euro within the remaining eight months. In the next session, the brainstorming for finding possible ways of earning extra money takes place in a relaxed and highly motivated atmosphere. A positive, productive attitude emerges, a sense of ‘Yes, we’ll crack this problem!’ is in the air. We are relieved and also proud of our class. The result speaks for itself. We put an ad into the Marl newspaper (see inset), students distributed flyers with the same text in our school and in Marl downtown. We also staged a Christmas market and a jumble sale.

[Inset (flyer text): Look!!! We clean and repair your bike! When? On March 15-22, 3pm-8pm (except Sunday, on Saturday noon-4pm) Where? At Creiler Square, next to the Bike Park. Info: 02364-5766 We wash your car! When? On March 15, 17, 18, and 22, 3pm-6pm Where? Willy-Brandt-Gesamtschule, Willy-Brandt-Allee 1
Look!!! We’ll run errands for you in Marl! When? Starting March 15, 3pm-9pm daily. Info 02365-515802
We clean all windows of your house! When? Starting March 15, time negotiable. Info: 02365-18569. The proceeds of this fundraising will help to finance the final field trip of class 10B of the Willy-Brandt-Gesamtschule! We appreciate any support!]

Several small teams got together and all of them contributed with their own fundraising projects. In the end, we raised the impressive amount of 1,125 Euro. This guaranteed that all of the students could take the final class field trip!

Instead of training the students' practical reasoning for better moral discernment by confronting them with artificial and theoretical moral dilemmas, they get hands-on training here by solving the actual problems of life in class. Class councils promote among other things the moral-democratic power of judgement of the young people.

- *aspect of equality of opportunity*: the young people become aware of the different social backgrounds and find a solution for all of them.
- *aspect of the level of moral development*: moral judgement of adolescents is encouraged most effectively by actively dealing with moral arguments.

No particular level of morality [4] is needed on either side (student or teacher) for a moral-democratic education. However, the realization of democratic solutions requires social skills on all sides that, in turn, will be promoted and further developed by this democratic decision-making. Practising democratic manners is strenuous for all participants, but our example shows that it is indeed worth it. The class council promotes the accommodation on the moral level. Statements by the students show various levels of moral awareness. During the dilemma discussion, the young people develop new thought structures.

How to behave toward each other

In my opinion, young people seldom learn

- how to solve conflicts on their own,
- how to end a quarrel without one participant losing face,
- how to express feelings adequately (clear, but not in an offensive way),
- how to identify the issue of a quarrel and respond appropriately.

For me as class teacher, the challenge is considerable: a wide range of counselling skills have to be used to come to successful conflict solution strategies in the class council and to enable pupils to constructively solve conflicts on their own. Strategies of blaming, plotting and scheming are on the other hand behavioral patterns that were acquired for a long time before. These unfortunate ways of interaction have to be eliminated in a protracted training process in order to make room for an interactive style expressed in phrases like: I am important, you are important; I myself believe this-and-that; the solution is not just black or white; expressing oneself as precisely and concrete as possible (instead of "You always...", "You never..."), etc. This topic-centered interaction (Cohn 1975) as well as the mediation concept by Ingrid Engert (1997) provide effective techniques for practising constructive conflict solution strategies.

Discussions in the class council stick to certain rules and were created by us following the rules developed by Ruth Cohn and the rules we developed in the workshop "Democracy and class council." [5] One important rule is "Disturbances have priority." This rule implicates that the young people can communicate I-messages to the person they talk to while being able to express irritation, anger, rage adequately.

The "I'm cross"-box

This box sits on the classroom's window sill, next to it a stack of blank "I'm cross"-notes. Whenever I am irritated with a classmate, teacher, or situation, I write a rage note and drop it into the box. The president opens the box at the end of each week during the class council session.

Students dissatisfied with the results of their reaction read out their “I’m cross”-note. The class council will then try to find a solution by reflecting and discussing alternative behavior. One’s (emotional) actions as well as the classmates’ emotions caused by that are subject of discussion in the class council. Because of that, both aspects become more comprehensible and tangible. The students learn reflecting and controlling their contribution to the conflict. The way young people talk as well as the educational behavior of teachers often displays an asymmetrical, dominance-preserving communication between arrogance and degradation.

Both competences need frequent training sessions. Two examples will show how the acquisition of moral-democratic skills can be encouraged effectively (see appendix, mat. 1 and 2, p...)

“Teacher”: a paradigm shift

The class council as the core of Freinet didactics changes the learning processes in school by providing more opportunities for participation and creativity. Using this didactics, the class council meets the wishes of young people I outlined before. So, what kind of learning is “sensible”? It is sensible wherever the young people’s interests and desires are the subject of the learning process. This produces a paradigm shift: the adults have to find his or her way back to the young people, because the problem is not that the young are fed up with politics – the problem is the adults not giving proper attention to young people. The pupils learning consciousness and learning motivation are closely connected to this paradigm shift.

The adult is no longer “Super(wo)man”, the big magician having an answer for everything, or the authority governing everything. The adult obeys the common rules for living together while vouching for their observance. The adult’s part in the class council is concisely described in the political goals of Freinet’s pedagogics: “Like all the others, he (the adult, B. K.) is subject to criticism by the class council. At the same time, he is deprived of his inscrutability, freed from his omniscience and omnipotence...and more open for everyone. The role player becomes a person. His power is neither reinforced nor weakened, it is merely transformed: the power appropriate to an adult, open-minded, respected, and recognizable for everyone and capable of developing further (...). The adult himself becomes more tolerant, more lenient: the functioning group rules, the interesting and varied projects, the students committed to their self-chosen work, the balancing effect of the class council – all these will reassure and relieve him – just as it will reassure and relieve all the other members of the group! He will be able to observe better and to act with prudence and care since he feels less threatened. This helps him to help everyone in the group even more effectively.”[6]

The guiding principles of the class council are

- real life experience and interests of the young people as the starting point for democratic learning processes;
- holistic learning by keeping class work close to reality and the interests of the pupils;
- individualized learning situations and encouragement of social competence;
- independence and autonomy;
- ability to act.

Thus, the technique of the class council is an important contribution for quality assurance and development in school.

Appendix

Material 1: "I'm cross"-Note

What are you angry about?

What did you do about it so far?

Were you satisfied with the result of your reaction?

The training of I-messages and conscious handling of one's negative emotions such as irritation and anger gives practice in new patterns of behavior that will open the door for dialogic processes in the class council.

Material 2: Wrap Your Wishes

When I come into a store without self-service, I have to say what I want. While little children have no problems doing that ("I want ice cream!" – "I want to go to McDonald's!"), older children forget this behavioral pattern. They often state thing they dislike without directly addressing the other child: "Stop him from taking my eraser." – "Stop her getting on my nerves."

If I don't take myself and my wishes seriously, I shouldn't be surprised if others care even less. If something is really important to me, I have to be its advocate myself.

Genuine, clear I-messages are expressed in sentences:

I want to listen.

I want to work quietly.

An advocate will not scream accusations, whisper his or her complaints, or shout in class. Otherwise, the advocate would seem ridiculous and weak. He or she states his or her points in a calm and confident way, speaking loud and clear.

Use the following examples for practice, add your own examples

Someone slurs your name.

I want _____

Someone punches you, pulls your hair, and kicks you underneath the table.

I want _____

The members of the group won't let you participate.

I want _____

Someone throws your stuff into the rubbish-bin or sweeps it off the table.

I want _____

Possible examples for I-messages:

I want to be called ... and nothing else.

I want to decide myself who can touch or nudge me.

I want to be part of it.

I want to have my stuff back here.

Material 3: Offices in the Class Council

The President

I open the session.
I organize the succession of speakers.
I summarize discussions.
I suggest possible decisions.

The Secretary

I read out the agenda.
I take notes of who takes which task.
I take notes of decisions made.
I make short notes about each agenda topic.

The Referee

I remind anyone of the rules in case they are broken.
I interrupt if there is too much commotion.

The Timekeeper

I watch that the speakers keep to the time allowed.
I remind the others when there are just a few minutes left.

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- [4] cf. Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to supporting moral-democratic education.
- [5] I provide more detailed information in German in *Fragen und Versuche*, Heft 59 / March 1992, p.13-19.
- [6] Dietrich, Ingrid (1982), p.83. (in German)