

ACTIVATING METHODS AND SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

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Abstract. Activating didactics (AD) for cooperative and collaborative learning are becoming more popular in vocational education across Europe. AD is an approach to make students active in their learning process. For a teacher AD means that he or she has to change from teacher centered to more student centered: a guide who facilitates the process during a learning situation. This means that the teacher is no longer only responsible for the content of the topics, but he or she is a guide who facilitates the student with interactive ways of learning and active methods. Cooperative learning in groups demands dialogical skills from the participants. The result is that the student will enlarge knowledge and skills through exploration in a cooperative way with others. In active learning and competence based learning, the student has more responsibility to develop his or her competences. A competence is an integral mix of knowledge, skills and attitude in a meaningful authentic situation: a real situation in the daily life of the professional. For a teacher or coach it becomes more and more important to counsel and judge the student during consults. In a new ENTER expert workshop session at the Agricultural University in Plovdiv, next November, we will make a transfer from backgrounds in activating didactics into a useful and practical application of methods. We will also pay attention to the question: is it possible to make students self-responsible? We will discuss this question in a Socratic dialogue, a method to structure a dialogical learning process.

Keywords: active learning, cooperative learning, dialogical learning, didactical approach, self-responsible learning, Socratic dialogue

1. Activating didactics in cooperative learning

Activating didactics is a way of organizing learning to make people actively involved in learning and work. In Cooperative learning within Activating didactics students work together to achieve common goals (Ebbens & Etteken, 2005). During the ENTER Expertworkshop we will practice different activating methods which are helpful to activate and motivate students in vocational education.

1.1 The effect of Activating Didactics in Cooperative Learning (ADCL)

Why is an activating and cooperative approach of learning so important for organizing our lessons? First of all students are more independent and they are

more actively involved in learning. Instead of being a consumer of information, the student changes his or her role into a producer of knowledge, together with classmates and teacher. Everybody is involved and joins the learning process. The second reason is that ADCL has attention for differences between pupils. Everybody has their own qualities, strengths and weaknesses. In didactical cooperative methods there is a space for everybody. Another important issue is that the society calls for independent people who can cooperate well. In companies, in daily life, we need people who are able to guide themselves, who communicate, who pay attention to processes in groups, etc. The approach of ADCL motivates pupils and students, because lectures are divided in different parts with different methods and approached. ADCL helps teachers to enable students to learn effectively.

1.2. Circle of active learning

A lesson cannot only be seen as a self-contained unit. It has connections with former knowledge, lessons, educational activities and afterwards there will be a follow up which can be held in different ways. That's why within ADCL the process of structuring a lesson is a circle or spiral: the finish of one lesson is an important part of the starting situation of the next lesson. ADCL divides lessons in four different phases (Burg & Sijsling, 2008):

Orientation phase:

The introduction. Making students familiar with the topics, gauging the starting situation, what is the starting level of knowledge about the topic for this lesson?

Exploration phase:

Getting to work. In an active way students work in small groups on an assignment. Important is that students are responsible for finding and connecting the right knowledge to the assignment. The teacher is only a guide, counselor or coach. The teacher doesn't start the lesson with a frontal lecture!

Evaluation phase:

Evaluate both the products (content) and process (how did we get the result) of the lesson.

Transfer phase:

Looking forward with the students and make the transfer from the topic in this lesson to a real situation. Where can you use this knowledge? What are you going to do next week on the job?

1.3. Basic principles in active learning

Roughly there are three different styles of teaching (Veen & Wal, 2008): teacher centered (the frontal lecture), students centered (project based working) and shared leadership. The approach of ADCL is most coherent with shared leadership. In shared leadership both the teacher and the students have their responsibilities in

learning (Ebbens & Ettekoven, 2005). A student has influence and can think about the approach to an assignment. The teacher manages the learning processes and determines criteria, and creates space for elective assignments: he or she manages the process. ADCL characterizes itself by much interaction between the teacher and the student. The task of a teacher is coaching and activating, but not lecturing. Active learning is most effective in small method groups between 3 and 5 students and in general group sizes with a maximum of 25 students (Ebbens & Ettekoven, 2005). In the preparation phase, the teacher has to think carefully about the roles and tasks for students, as well as the ranking of the groups. Mixed groups with different levels, or groups with an even level? There is a difference between tasks and roles. Tasks are closely connected to the content. Tasks are the various assignments that the group has to fulfill. Roles are more connected to the process of the lesson. For the teacher alone it's almost impossible to organize the process for every micro-group, so the teacher has to delegate some responsibilities to the participants of the group. Who is responsible for time management? Who is the secretary? Who presents the results of the assignment? Who is the chief, who is allowed to ask questions to the teacher? Within the framework of activating didactics, it is the group that communicates with the teacher and not the individual. And it's important that the teacher only helps groups and doesn't help individuals.

In the 'exploration phase', the students work on a task or assignment, independently or in small groups. It is important that they are aware of the learning goal that is the aim of the assignment/task and the task requirements: the type of assignment, which methods they can use, how much time they are allowed spend on the task, how the task is to be evaluated, what role they take as a student and how the teacher provides support.

2. Dialogical learning in a socratic way

Within our workshop we will also pay attention on the question if it will be possible to make students self-responsible. We will come to an answer by having a Socratic dialogue together. In this part we will explain more on dialogical learning and competence and about the Socratic dialogue.

2.1. Dialogues

Not every kind of communication is called dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). There are several researches that connect some important characteristics that belong to a dialogical situation. The attitude of every participant has to be philanthropic and every participant will have to use interventions that will generate dialogue. Shared understanding is more important than finding a consensus. In dialogue there are only winners, instead of winners and losers as for example in a debate or discussion. Dialogue is a powerful tool to understand what actually

thinking is, as a process (Factor & Carret, 1991). Dialogue is based on equal co-constructivism of understanding. It is shared thinking and getting well acquainted with certain subjects and activity (Aarnio & Enqvist, 2001).

2.2. The dialogical competence

Aarnio and Enqvist (2001) divide the dialogical competence into four parts. The first one is to open your state of mind for having a dialogue. Preparing the approach to communicate in dialogue is the second one. The third step is to create a dialogical situation and the last step is to build a general view through a dialogue. To achieve a dialogical attitude, both face to face and in e-learning environments, a participant needs meta-skills and self-monitoring to become competent. Beside this attitude you need tools and instruments to make a dialogue non-fuzzy, which leads to creating new understanding and knowledge creation (Aarnio, 2010). Important is to communicate in a symmetrical way as equals and being reciprocal. Dialogical situations in learning processes means also letting go of ego centrality, communication without ulterior motives, being present, awareness of one's preconceptions and assumptions and building on the others contribution. Other characteristics are opening one's incomplete thinking, formulate clearly (especially in a virtual environment), recognizing key utterances and staying carefully on the others contribution, in a word for word manner. The skills of questioning and inquiring are crucial points to develop a productive dialogue.

2.3. Socratic dialogues

One method to learn dialogical skills and to have a dialogue with inexperienced students is the Socratic approach. The Socratic dialogue is a conversation technique that is based on the conversations that the Greek philosopher Socrates conducted. He tried especially the youth themselves bring to reflect mainly by asking questions and to test their validity. His pupil Plato admired him and through his written dialogues we think we know something about Socrates. In his approach people create their own knowledge through systematic reflection on their own experience. The knowledge that people gain from this process is deep and anchored within the person of the learner.

Kessels (2008) transferred this method for application in the 20th century. His basic idea is that through abstraction principles we can discover what lies behind our actions.

The Socratic dialogue is characterized by the following structure (Kessels, 2008)

- Selecting a theme that matters for the participants;
- Inventing of (philosophical) questions and selection;
- Sharing examples from own experiences and select one;

- Ask questions about the example for clarification;
- Formulation of the so called ‘heat point’: a crucial moment with a core statement;
- Respond to this core statement: Identify other positions and arguments;
- Conclusion: is there consensus in the answers to the question?;
- Evaluation of the conversation

In a Socratic dialogue, you will learn the principles as follows (Kessels, 2008): determining position (giving opinion), argue (logical reasoning), concretize (examples and facts), summarizing (separate main issues from side issues) and listen (to repeat what the other person has said).

The Socratic dialogue is characterized by the following rules, as you can see there is a difference with a discussion or debate (Kessels, 2008):

- Create your own opinion on personal experience: not in books, stories of others or authorities;
- Be concrete and concise: no lengthy monologues. Make sure you can be followed;
- Think about it with each other: it is a collaborative investigation. Try to understand each other;
- Strive for consensus (agreement).

Conclusion

In this article we have shortly described the why and what on Activating Didactics and Collaborative Learning. In our workshop we will have time to practice ADCL and to teach you on: How can I implement ADCL in my own practice? Besides we will also discuss and reflect on making students more self responsible for their own learning. By using the Socratic way you will learn to use a method of having a dialogue within the classroom and we will find a shared answer on the question: Is it possible to be self responsible for your own learning?

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