

Playing Devil's Advocate: Controversy as a Teaching Tool in Education for Sustainability

Keywords

pedagogy of discomfort, actor-network theory, teacher training

Biographical Note

I teach German and English at a grammar school in Hamburg. In addition, I've been active in teacher training since 2022. I've also hosted presentations on a wide range of A-level topics geared towards sixth-form teachers in Hamburg and Bremen for more than ten years.

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Abstract (500 words)

Abstract (300 words)

In Hamburg, education for sustainable development has been an obligatory part of second-language learning ever since new state-wide curricula have been introduced in 2022. For teachers as well as for those involved in teacher training, the main challenge that arises from this shift in focus is how to translate the general concept(s) into theory-based yet also actionable strategies to be used in lesson planning.

Utilizing the conceptual framework of actor-network theory (ANT), my presentation will explore how to foreground the controversial undercurrents beneath sustainability-related topics such as climate change to generate chances for socio-political education as well as opportunities for language learning.

This serves to defamiliarize cherished notions that pupils might cling to in order to critically re-assess their own values and beliefs (pedagogy of discomfort) –crucially, this entails being willing and able to also step back from seemingly “safe”, socially sanctioned ideas and stress-test these while playing devil's advocate, using authentic materials from ideologically diverse sources (“thick descriptions”, in Bruno Latour's terms). Such a dialectic, deconstructive and debate-driven approach also generates chances for language learning/acquisition along the way.

Thus, arriving at a pedagogy of hope might require training pupils in the art of ideological criticism, which in turn might be translated into classroom activities involving digital media, since the digital sphere is where pupils will primarily be exposed to often highly polarized debates surrounding the issues at stake here. This also presents the opportunity to strengthen their media literacy.

Because the pupils are expected to entertain ideas from diverse backgrounds as thoroughly as possible, it is of the highest importance for (prospective) teachers to plan lesson activities in a way that allows them to refrain from taking direct influence on the “expected” outcomes too early while at the same time providing ethical guidance and emotional support.

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