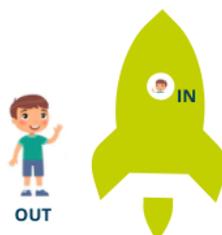


## EXTERNALISING PROBLEMS



### MAIN FEATURES

Reinforced skills (TASC Cluster)	AIM, FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS
Suitable for	Teachers, Students
Difficulty level	Low
Setting	Individual, group
Minimum number of participants	1
Average time length	60 minutes
Special equipment	No
Online version	Yes



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## 1. DESCRIPTION

The exercise is done as an interview. In this format, the exercise consists of two parts, plus a final stage of reflection.

In the first part, the focus is on personal characteristics that the person (as an interviewee or in his/hr reflective practice) may find difficult or not happy to have. In this case, the focus is on adjectives that the interviewee can apply to him/herself.

In the second part, the person is asked to make a shift in his/her language, transforming adjectives into nouns, focusing on nouns instead of adjectives. The answers are about the production of nouns to identify the external states of the interviewee. Then a final reflection step could be of help for a better understanding of the exercise and for an impact on personal development.

## 2. AIM / BENEFITS

The exercise is rooted in the tradition of narrative practices (Bruner, 1990; White, 2007).

Narrative practitioners often find that when we talk about problems as adjectives, we internalise them, that is we see them as reflections of ourselves.

When we speak about a difficult situation as a noun, instead, we are externalising it. Externalising problems means that we have more options in managing our life, because it helps in making space between the person and the problem. Through externalisation, the person is no longer described as "the problem", but is "in relation with a problem".

Narrative practitioners highlight that considering the problems as internal to the persons is an oversimplification.

Instead, they suggest that problems are created within the social context, where the criteria of what is "right" and what is "wrong", what is "success" and what is "problem" are established. The use of externalised language takes into account that all the persons involved in that specific context explicitly or implicitly contribute to the creation of a problem, so every problem is not an aspect of a single person, but a social issue.

Consequently, the use of externalised conversations in the classroom can be really helpful in managing its climate, because it avoids processes of blaming a single student or teacher and encourages all the people involved in taking actions to handle the problem.

So the main aim of this exercise is to teach how to externalise problems using language in individual and or social interactions (e.g. an interview).

This exercise is an example of a crossover between narrative practises and the empowerment of optimism in positive psychology. For positive psychologists, people who think optimistically often see problems as a discrete event, instead of a reflection of themselves.



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The benefits are related to a positive impact on personal strategies to face problems, or something that people are not happy about. In the context of a school, that could be the professional experience of teachers in the collaboration with colleagues or the inclusion of students in a classroom environment.

### 3. COMPETENCIES CLUSTER(s) related

CLUSTER NR 3 AIMING, and NR 5 SOLUTIONS

#### *Why*

1. The first cluster involved in this exercise is cluster number 3, "Aiming", which is based on the idea that students' and teachers' expectations (both in terms of classroom climate and subjects' teaching/learning) mutually influence each other, clarifying their goals. More specifically, the exercise is future-oriented, in the sense that externalising problems can help teachers and students in finding solutions to be applied in the next stages and events of their classroom routines.
2. Related to this point is cluster number 5, "Solution". Externalising problems can help to "Focus on what works" and highlights a bit more the shift from problem-solving to solution building. In the case of this exercise, the externalisation problem is the basis of a new approach of solution finding for teachers and students. From this point of view, the exercise of the Externalising problem offers a different way of thinking and talking about classroom difficulties.

### 4. HOW TO DO THE EXERCISE

#### ***Step 1 / Preparation:***

As already mentioned, the exercise can be very interesting when it is done as an interview. So it is a good idea to manage an interview between two pairs of teachers or students (interviewer and interviewee), or even between teachers and students, to ask a series of questions and take turns interviewing each other. The alternative is the single person use of this exercise, so teachers and students can interview themselves and write down the answers on a piece of paper. As for all the TASC exercises, find a quiet place in school to do the exercise.

#### ***Step 2: questioning with adjectives***

The exercise starts with the interviewer asking the interviewee to think about personal characteristics of him/her that he/she finds difficult, something that he/she is not happy about, that may cause troubles or that he/she might like to change. The interviewer asks the interviewee to write down this characteristic as an adjective (for example: lazy, disorganised, stressed, hyperactive, anxious, moody, grumpy, etc.).

Then the interviewer asks the interviewee to answer these questions:

1. How did you become ...?
2. Do you do things when you are ... that you would normally do if you were not ...?

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3. Are you currently experiencing any difficulties because you are ...?
  4. What is your self-image when you are ...?

### **Step 3: questioning with nouns**

The second part of the exercise is the proper externalising phase, in which the interviewer asks the interviewee to take into consideration the same characteristic and turn it into a noun (for example: laziness, disorganisation, stress, hyperactivity, anxiety, mood, etc.).

Then as for Step 2, the interviewer asks the interviewee to answer these questions:

1. What made you vulnerable to ...?
2. Under what circumstances is it more likely that ... may take over the situation?
3. What effects does ... have on your life and your relationships with other people?
4. Has ... led you to any difficulties you may be experiencing in the present?
5. Have there been times in which ... might have taken over the situation but you did not let it happen?

### **Step 4: Switch roles and re-start!**

After the second part, the participants can switch the roles and re-start the exercise from the beginning, starting with de-freezing the internal state, and then exploiting it into the external world.

## **5. DEBRIEF**

The exercise needs a final debriefing in reflection mode, in which just the participants reflect on what they have just learned.

The final questions would be:

- What was it like to answer questions about adjectives and about nouns?
- What did the adjectives make you think and feel?
- What about the questions on nouns?
- Did you notice any differences between talking about something as an adjective and as a noun?
- If you notice some differences, what were they?

## **6. SPECIAL MATERIALS**

The only requested tools are paper and pencil to write down the adjectives and nouns lists.

## **7. TIPS AND TRICKS**

This is one of the few exercises in TASC that is easily done also individually. So, the alternative to the couple-version is the single person use of this exercise, so teachers and students can interview themselves and write down the answers on a piece of paper. Considering that classroom and school climates are social processes and dynamics, teachers and students can try the exercise first by themselves, just to get it on and to understand the overall logic of the externalising process, and then do it with at least a pair (a teacher, a student).



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Another variation could be a cooperative version of the exercise, asking groups of students to reflect collectively on adjectives and nouns to describe and externalise their behaviours (for example in the case of conflicts among different groups inside the classroom).

### 8. ON-LINE VERSION

It is possible to set up an online version using today's available video conferencing tools, such as Google Meet, Zoom, etc. The preparatory activity is the same, as well as the steps to follow.

### 9. BIBLIOGRAPHY - SITOGRAPHY

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