Teachers And Students Improving School Climate Together

Co-funded by the
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WHAT DOES "LEARNING" MEAN?

MAIN FEATURES

Strengthened skills	LEADERSHIP
Suitable for	Teachers
Difficulty level	Medium
Setting	Group, individual
Number of participants	At least 1
Average duration	90 minutes
Special equipment/materials	Yes
Online version	Yes

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1. Description:

This activity is inspired by the work of Wagner & Watkins (2005).

Teachers are presented with a concept map that provides 3 different definitions of "learning" and are asked to reflect on their ideas of learning compared to those definitions.

2. Objective / Benefits

The activity aims to help teachers reflect on their ideas about the learning process and practice in terms of how they relate to the classroom.

Because at TASC we believe that the quality of the classroom climate is closely and mutually connected with teaching and learning processes, teachers could benefit from reflecting on their role in improving the classroom climate by exploring their idea of what "learning" is.

3. Related SKILLS CLUSTERS

No. 2 - LEADERSHIP, which in this case refers to the idea that a teacher's definition of "learning" affects how he relates to the class and serves as a point of reference.

- The skills trained in this cluster are:
  o **Awareness of the power dynamics in the relationship,** because by reflecting on their definition of learning, the teacher can improve his awareness of the role of power he has in the classroom and reflect on how to use it more effectively to improve the quality of the climate in the classroom.
  o **Leading Being One Step Behind**, because by reflecting on his definition of learning and how it affects his approach to the classroom, the teacher has the opportunity to evaluate how to apply his idea of learning together with the position of allowing

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students more freedom to express their points of view and make their own decisions for the sake of improving the classroom climate.

4. How to do the exercise

Step 1 / Preparation:
Explain to teachers that the purpose of the activity is to explore what "learning" means to them. To facilitate this exploration, the "three main narratives of learning" suggested by Wagner & Watkins (ibid.) will be provided:

1. **Learning= Being taught**. In this narrative, the teacher has an active role in transmitting knowledge and information, while the student basically has the passive role of the one who receives knowledge. Consequently, the teacher has a privileged role, as he is recognized as an "expert".

2. **Learning = Creation of individual meaning**. This narrative highlights the human ability to give meaning and to stay away from experience, so reflection and review are important. Thinking about thinking (metacognition) becomes an element, as well as the broader learning capacity (meta-learning): both support the student who "determines himself". When teachers apply this idea of learning, they act more like guides who "stand to the side" than "wise men on stage." The downside of this view is that sometimes teachers are obliged to take on the role of expert vis-à-vis students, families and/or educational institutions.

3. **Learning = Building knowledge as part of doing things with others**. According to this narrative, the construction of new knowledge takes place in non-linear, often fundamental ways, resulting from interaction with others on a task that has not been chosen to learn something: a working group of teachers who create a policy, a group of photocopier technicians who fix a new model without ever opening the manual, a team of professionals developing new practices in relation to changing conditions, two people learn about a particular type of welding while repairing a Land Rover and so on. On a broader level this narrative can describe the processes of scientific communities, in which the verification of truth claims is more formalised. The idea of knowledge that emerges is much more rooted than the depersonalised and decontextualised version that is found in the school programs suggests, but this sometimes represents a double-edged sword since teachers are asked to lower the quality of the programs and provide answers to the different stakeholders of reference (be they managers, parents, ...).

The facilitator points out to the participants that none of these definitions of learning is "true" or "false", "good" or "bad" per se: all of them can be useful, according to the objectives that teachers have in that situation, with that particular class, in that particular context.

The activity aims to help teachers reflect on their idea of learning and have some valuable insights on how they can broaden their point of view on this concept to increase the heritage and resources they can rely on in their relationship with the class.

Step 2 / Explore personal narratives about learning

The facilitator asks some questions to help teachers reflect on their "performance app" ideas. Here are some examples:

- *Which of the three main narratives is your idea of learning closest to? Because?*
- *How does your idea of learning affect your work as a teacher and how you relate to students?*
- *Can you think of an episode with the classroom where your idea of learning proved useful?*
- *Can you think of an episode with your class where your idea of learning failed? Considering the three main learning narratives mentioned above, which one could have been more useful to you in that situation?*
- *Can you identify a situation where the first grand narrative of learning (Learning = Being Taught) would be helpful to you and the class?*
- *Can you identify a situation where the second big narrative of learning (Learning = Creating Individual Meaning) would be helpful to you and the class?*
- *Can you identify a situation where the third grand narrative of learning (Learning = Building knowledge as part of doing things with others) would be helpful to you and the class?*

The facilitator invites participants to write their answers so they can be discussed in the plenary in the last part of the activity.

Step 3 / Sharing reflections

The facilitator invites participants to divide the group into pairs if the activity is performed with a group.
In turn, each teacher has 5-10 minutes to share his vision of learning, considering the three main narratives of learning provided in phase 1 and the answers to the questions asked in phase 2.
If the activity is carried out in a unique environment, the facilitator invites the teacher to share his insights.

Final Round / Conclusion

Once each member of the couple has shared their insights with their partner, the Facilitator invites participants to share their reflections in plenary, answering the following questions:
- *If you could identify one lesson from this exercise, what would it be?*
- *How might your reflections on your idea of learning influence your approach to teaching in the future?*

- *How could these reflections be helpful to help the classroom improve the quality of its relational climate?*

5. Reflection

This stage is a group discussion about the activity.

The aim is to help teachers in the group reflect on the usefulness of this activity and how it could be used to raise awareness about how a teacher's definition of learning can influence their approach to working within a group of colleagues.

To get the conversation going, here are some examples of questions you might ask:

- *How could reflecting on his idea of "learning" help your colleagues?*
- *How do you think these reflections can be helpful to the school management?*
- *What positive change could there be in your school environment if some key stakeholders (other teachers, school leaders, school administrative staff) were more aware that our concept of learning affects how we approach students and classes?*

You can invite participants to share their answers to questions with the group or invite them to write answers and reflect for themselves after the group session ends.

6. Special materials

- Pens and sheets of paper.

7. Tips and tricks

Since this activity concerns a rather demanding topic and aims to stimulate dialogue, we suggest working with small groups (max 6 people).

8. On-line version

The activity can also be done online. A platform like MIRO (www.miro.com), for example, allows you to create conversation rooms where participants can work in pairs and you can access them to monitor how they are doing.

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9. Bibliography - Sitography

Wagner P., & Watkins C. (2005). "Narrative work in schools". In A. Vetere & E. Dowling (eds.), *Narrative Therapies with children and their families: A practitioners' guide to concepts and approaches*. London: Brunner-Routledge.