Student-Centered Teaching Method 4:

Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion

Excerpts taken from Georg Lind, URL: http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/moral/dildisk-e.htm

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**Background**
The Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD) has emerged from the dilemma method by Moshe Blatt and Lawrence Kohlberg. The KMDD is also based on Habermas' communicative ethics, Oser's discourse method, and Lind's Dual-Aspect-Theory of moral behavior and development (Lind, 2002).
The KMDD has been used in many educational programs. On the basis of this experience and new insights into modern learning psychology, I have added new elements to this method, changed several features, and sharpened its focus to make it really effective. Because of the many changes, actually a new method has emerged: the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (Lind, 2003).
The commonalities and differences of these two methods are described in detail in Lind (2003: Morality can be taught... [in German and Spanish]) and Lind (2003: The Konstanz Method...).
The KMDD is one of the few educational methods that have been systematically evaluated, too. When properly applied, this method has unusually strong and lasting effects on the cognitive-moral development of students of various age groups. It seems, that it is most effective for 5th to 10th graders. Yet, in recent intervention studies, for college and university students the effect sizes were also very high (gains of 14 C-points; r > 0.70).

Here, I give a brief introduction into this method especially with teachers in mind, who wish to use this method in their own classroom. At the end you will find a newly revised script of a dilemma discussion. It will help you to visualize this method and try it out in your own class. Once you have fully understood the basic didactic principle of moral and democratic learning, you will no longer need this script but use it only occasionally, e.g., for training other teachers.

**Goals**
Democracy is a highly demanding idea about how people want to live together. In a democracy, we have exchanged the rule by a king or a dictator through the rule by moral principles to guide our action, and to solve any conflict by means of rational, nonviolent discourse rather than by violence and power.
It seems that we need not to worry too much about the moral ideal of democracy -- polls all over the world show that it is well accepted by a vast majority of people -- but about how to apply this ideal in everyday life, when our ideals come under pressure from our own emotions or from other people.
The maintenance and development of democracy requires citizens with high moral-democratic competencies, e.g., the competence to make judgments based on moral principles and to enter a moral discourse with others, especially with opponents and even enemies, to
educate (not suppress!) our moral emotions, so that we can act upon our judgments effectively and smoothly.

Moral-democratic competencies cannot be acquired by indoctrination or by old ways of teaching "from above", but must be learned by children, adolescents and adults "from bottom up", very effectively, for example, through the solution of "educative moral dilemmas" under the guidance of well-trained teachers. The teachers and their way of teaching must be a role model for the children. Only through this model the children will get to know what democratic behavior really means, and how to live and work together democratically. The ultimate goal of a moral dilemma discussion is to develop basic moral-democratic competencies, in particular moral and democratic competencies like the ability to act upon commonly shared moral ideals or principles, even in situations when one is under pressure to acquiesce, pressure, e.g., from a majority's opinion, prejudice, abusive authorities, or just laziness and low mood.

Moral Judgment Competence

This is the key concept. While most other programs want to foster moral attitudes or values, moral dilemma discussion aims at moral competencies. In agreement with Kohlberg (1964), we define this competence as "the capacity to make decisions and judgments which are moral (i.e., based on internal principles) and to act in accordance with such judgments" (p. 425).
We would add, the ability to act in accordance with moral principles even when we come under pressure to submit to other forces, like the opinion of the majority, immoral laws or conventions, illegitimate authority, or just ignorance or laziness.
Or when we feel paralyzed by a genuine moral dilemma, in which we see no other way out than to transgress some important moral principle.
A mature or developed moral development, said Kohlberg (1958, pp. 128-129), must do justice both a) to the moral principles to which one is committed, and b) the very situation in which one experiences a moral dilemma... A moral judgment thus must both be highly consistent (in regard to one's own moral principles), and differentiated (in regard to the particular situation).

Constructivism: How to Stimulate Moral Learning

We cannot think of all moral dilemmas that a person will ever encounter, and even less able are we to provide a solution for all of them. All we can do to prepare children to be better able to solve their moral dilemmas by themselves and to utilize the advise and support of other people.
We have found that the best way of preparation is to confront the learner with the kind of tasks that they should learn to master, and also to provide them with support and guidance. This kind of teaching can be best compared to vaccination with tamed viruses, by which the body is stimulated to build up its capabilities to fight real virus attacks.
With the method of dilemma discussion, the teacher puts the student into a semi-real dilemma situation and confronts him with a controversial discussion, all of which creates emotions and social reactions that need to be taken into account. To persist in this situation, the students must activate and develop his/her moral and democratic competencies, for example, a) to give (good) reasons for defending their opinion on a moral issue or choice, b) to listen to opposing reasoning, evaluate and appreciate it, c) to deal with conflicts between group pressure and one’s own conscience, or d) to take the perspective of the actors in the dilemma story (the decision maker and the people affected by him or her). The confrontation with counter-arguments has shown to be a very powerful stimulation for moral-cognitive development.
Support and Challenge

By using tough moral dilemmas, the teacher can create a learning environment which is real enough to create moral emotions and social pressure. By alternating cycles of challenge and support, this method makes sure that the stimulation of moral emotions and social tensions never get to a point where learning becomes impossible. To maximize the learning process, it is important to expose students to an intensity and amount of conflicting views which is neither too boring, nor too frightening for the student. In either case, the learning process will be hampered. To this end, the teacher must a) choose a proper dilemma, and b) organize a format of discussion that is both supporting and challenging.

One great difficulty with any teaching method is that each student has his/her own way of learning. We found that the KMDD is well suited to cope with this problem because it contains a good balance between phases of support and challenge, and helps the teacher to keep the learning climate in an optimal range by speeding up or slowing down the phases. We have used this method already in large groups of 100 people and more.

Obviously, a teacher must be well prepared for this method. In order to keep the learning process within the "proximal zone of learning" (Vygotsky), he must know the art of dilemma discussion well and be aware of the responsibility that goes with it.

Semi-real Dilemmas

With the KMDD, we use moral dilemmas that come from outside the classroom, and whose solution is only fictitious. Usually, those dilemmas are called 'hypothetical,' and 'not real.' I prefer to call them 'semi-real' because, if they catch the attention of the students and stimulate a serious, lively debate, then these dilemmas are not just hypothetical, but in some sense real, namely in the same sense as a good fiction or movie is real for the audience.

If a dilemma story is not real for the participants, it will not stimulate moral-cognitive processes in the students. Thus, teachers should be careful not to make the dilemma discussion un-real by spontaneous changes to the story, or by allowing participants to "simulate" their opinion and arguments, or by other forms of role-playing. Those other method have great merits when used for other purposes.

Semi-real dilemmas may be taken from literature, daily newspapers, or immediate experience. There great advantage of semi-real dilemmas is that the teacher may freely alter them to fit his or her didactic intentions.

Fully real dilemmas are the topic of the just community approach to moral education, which is not covered here. It suffices to say that the discussion of semi-real dilemmas seems to be a good preparation for discussing real problems in just community meetings, and that the discussion of real problems requires even more preparation because those problems are as they are and cannot be made "didactical" (Oser & Althof, 1994).

Constructing a Moral Dilemma

Above all, it is important to chose a genuinely moral dilemma for discussion rather than just an interesting case. It must be a behavioral dilemma, that is, in the story someone must make an immediate decision about two courses of action. There is no third choice, and the person does not have much time to rethink or even rearrange the situation.

It must be a moral dilemma, that is, it must involve one or more truly moral principles, that come into conflict with each other or with itself. Yes, a moral principle can conflict with itself, that is, it can imply two mutually exclusive course of action, depending on how one weighs the circumstances. However, in a moral dilemma typically, two moral principles of about equal import clash.
For the present purpose, moral principles (or universal laws) must be distinguished from other, non-moral values and norms. Immanuel Kant’s *Categorical Imperative* provides a useful criterion for making this distinction. To behave morally, he demands says, one should "act only on a maxim that you can at the same time will to be a universal law" should be considered moral principles. In other words, only those maxims or, as we may say now, values that can be universalized can be regarded as moral principles. Example for good moral dilemmas are the famous *Heinz Dilemma* used in Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Interview, and the *Sharon Dilemma*, used in many dilemma discussions. 

Other values may be conventional, cultural or personal values. These values may also be subjected to discussions in the classroom. However, only with *moral, universalizable* values or principles, the teacher can expect that the students *share* them and engage in a open, rational discussion. With other values, the students may get entangled in the question of 'right' cultural or personal values. It is very unlikely that this question can be solved on the basis of rational discourse. While we do not recommend to use such value conflicts in dilemma discussion, they can (and should) be addressed by the school in other ways. 

The difficulty of the moral dilemma should always be adapted to the experience and the maturity of the students. For the teacher, it takes considerable competence and experience to design good dilemma discussion units. But once the teacher understands the basics, he or she will be able to construct good dilemmas on the spot, whenever it fits into the curriculum or seems helpful for other reasons. 

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**Checklist for Dilemma Construction**

In written form the dilemma should not be longer than quarter of a page. The optimal length of a session is 80 to 100 minutes. The approximate times for each step is indicated below. As the teacher gets more experienced he or she may vary this time schedule. One dilemma discussion session in two weeks seems to be optimal; more are less.

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**Optimal Length of a Session**

From my experience and that of many teachers, I regard the optimal length of a single discussion session is 80 to 90 minutes, that is, two regular 45 minute periods. Usually, 45 minutes do not suffice to get a good dilemma discussion started in a class. In many instances the students need 20 to 30 minutes to fully grasp the “moral core” of the dilemma story, and to be able to imagine the psychological pressures under which the protagonist suffers. A session length of two about hours also seems to have the highest, and most lasting effects on students’ development of moral judgment competence. The scheme below shows a two-hour dilemma discussion.

However, I have also seen good dilemma discussion that took only 45 minutes or much less. Short periods may work well when the topic is well known to all students and the dilemma has a simple structure.

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**Target Groups**

The method of dilemma discussion has been used in a variety of schools and grade levels, with children as young as 10 years of age, and adults from various professional background. From my own experience of about 20 years and from the experience of many teachers, we know that this method is highly welcome by students and by parents. It can change the whole learning climate of a class to the better, teachers tell me. I have witnessed many very lively and engaged dilemma discussions with students of grade level 5 to 13, college and graduate classes.
From systematic evaluation of the impact of moral dilemma discussions (the Blatt-method and the KMDD), we know that its best effects are achieved in grades 5 to 10. Yet, high effect sizes have also been found with college and university students.

**Conditions for a Good Dilemma Discussion**

We have found the following conditions essential for achieving a good dilemma discussion:

- A good education of the teacher in his own subject field as well as in the field of general education. It is not necessary that the teacher has studied moral philosophy. However, some acquaintance with important contributors to this field is very helpful. I recommend especially the writings of John Dewey, Charles S. Pierce, Immanuel Kant, Jürgen Habermas, and Hans-Otto Apel.
- The availability of a supervisor or colleague who can give feedback on trial dilemma discussions.
- Intensive preparation of the session, if possible together a fellow teacher. My experience is that the better the teacher is prepared, the less he or she must intervene when the students enter the actual discussion phase.
- Doing dilemma discussions regularly, i.e., about every two weeks in a particular class. The students will be bored and profit little, if two dilemma discussions are run on the same day or within too short a time interval.
- Openness for discussing really controversial problems rather than confining the discussion of pseudo-problems.
- Awareness of the limitations of dilemma discussion. It can be easily adapted to many subjects and pedagogical intentions. Yet, the aims of moral education cannot be reduced to the scope of dilemma discussions. Other learning is as important, e.g., the learning of chemistry, geography or foreign languages, of psychological and social facts, of political controversies etc.
- Moral dilemma discussion must not be confused with exercises in rhetoric proficiencies. For the success of moral dilemma discussions, moral sincerity and scruple are of paramount importance. In contrast, such virtues are not necessary for rhetoric success, or may even hinder it.

**Script for a Dilemma Discussion**

**The Konstanz Method**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ACTIVITY OF TEACHER AND STUDENTS</th>
<th>DIDACTIC, DOCUMENTATION &amp; REFLECTION</th>
<th>PHASE</th>
<th>LEARNING GOALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>x+00</td>
<td>Introduction to the Dilemma.</td>
<td>Make sure that every single person in the room reaches a full understanding of the story by presenting the dilemma in various ways:</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>- Getting facts straight</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big group.</td>
<td>- first orally (variation: as a little stage play)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Perceiving and understanding a moral dilemma</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present the moral dilemma of person X to the class and ask questions about it:</td>
<td>- then in written form (see examples) for individual reading and reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Understanding the multitude of possible motives behind a decision</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- “Who thinks it is no problem? Why?”</td>
<td>- then let the students paraphrase the story.</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Becoming aware of the diversity of perceptions of a dilemma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- “Who thinks this is a problem? Is it difficult or not so difficult? Why?”</td>
<td>- Documentation:</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Sharing moral bewilderment and feeling of commonness.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- “What makes it a problem? Why is it hard to decide what to do?”</td>
<td>- Write protocol notes that all can see (blackboard, slide, computer-beamer)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- “How would you vote? Was the decision of the protagonist right or was it wrong?”</td>
<td>- Optional: Have a peer-supervisor or student record the conversation in writing or with video)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>End this phase when you feel that everyone got the facts and values involved. Silence may indicate a need for thinking; do not rush the students. Chatting among students usually signifies the beginning of boredom.</td>
<td>- Optional: Create a “fish-bowl” by letting half of the students observe the conversation amongst the other half.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| x+15 | First Vote                        | Create a (not too) challenging learning environment modeled after real life with time pressure, social urgency, and no-non-decision situation: you cannot not decide: “Even if you faint, your behavior has real consequences.” | Challenge | - Feeling some of the pressure of time and urgency of a real life dilemma. |
|      | Ask students for a “straw vote:”  | - Trying to get everyone to decide, yet ultimately always respect any | | |
|      | - “Though for person X the problem was very difficult, s/he had no time for endless | | |
Collecting supportive arguments in small groups

Divide the participants into two groups according to their decision.

Small groups: Let students form small groups of 3 or 4 persons who share the decision on the dilemma.

Task: “Prepare for the discussion later. Collect together argument supporting your decision on person X in the dilemma. Take notes.”

End the small group session when the noise level drops considerably, indicating that there was sufficient time.

Plenary discussion

Big group

Assign two assistants to record the pro and contra arguments visible for all.
The two opposing groups should be seated facing each other.

Explain the principle and rule of the plenary discussion:
a) Principle of Respect: “Respect each other and all human beings not in this room. You are free to bring up any argument and make any comment on others’ arguments. Yet, do not say anything bad or good about people.”
b) Ping-Pong-Rule: “The person who has spoken chooses one from the opposite group for responding. Then he or she does the same, so that the right to learner to refrain from a (public) decision.

Didactic: Small groups: Not less then 3 and not more than 4 for each group! Bigger groups prevent some participants from speaking, smaller groups become dull.

If the participants cluster in other group sizes, intervene with friendliness by counting load the members of each group: “One, two. Ha?” “One, two, three, four, five. Ha?”

Ask for volunteers to fill up too small groups, or to break up too big groups. Be insisting!

Ask the participants to spread out in the room so they do not hinder each other.

If the participants request explanations for this, refer them to the post-discussion reflection phase.

Reflection:

- Should a note-taker be appointed for each group?

[Support] - Learn to value peers as a source of support.

[Challenge] - Learn to appreciate a public debate on “real” (moral) issues.

- Learn to make yourself heard; present the reasons for your opinion succinctly.

- Learn to distinguish between the quality of an argument (which you may attack) and the quality of a person (who you should always respect).
speak goes back and forth between the two groups.”

Advice the participants: “Take your time, and remember: Bring forward only your best argument! If you present more than one argument, your opponent is likely to respond to your weaker arguments.

- Do not take notes; this could be misperceived as some form of control or supervision.
- Let the smaller group start with the discussion, saying: “To give you a head-start, you may begin, though I believe that your arguments may be just as convincing as the ones from the bigger group.”

**Documentation:**
- Have peer-supervisor or students assistants observe the discussion using an observation sheet.
- Have the discussion video-taped; use two video-cameras if possible; mind the quality of the sound recording; do not make cuts if “nothing” happens because phases of silence are always phases of special kind of learning.

**Reflection:**
- What have you, the teacher, learned from this discussion?
- Was there enough time for the discussion? Yet remember: it is very important to leave enough time for the first phase and for the next phase! These two phases need the teacher most. The discussion can and most likely will go on by itself after the class.

### Appreciating opposing arguments

**Small groups.**

Say: “Here is your new task: Which of the arguments of the other group were their best ones? Please, think over the arguments you have heard. Use the notes on the blackboard (or on other media) for remembering what has been said by the other group. Take this as an opportunity to make the other group compliments.”

Let the participants form small groups of 3 or 4 again.

End this small group conversations when the level of noise drops considerably.

Ask for responses to your task. Start with calling up responders from the larger group first (“Now it is your turn being first.”)

When no one requests to speak anymore, switch to the other group. You may return to the first group if new requests show up.

### Final vote

“After having looked into the dilemma more closely, how would you now judge the decision of person X? Please raise your hand if you say s/he was right. Now please raise your hand if you say s/he was wrong.”

Count votes.

### Reflection on the lesson:

“What have you learned from this lesson? Or do you feel that this has been a waste of time and that you have learned nothing?”

Collect information on other
learning opportunities: “How often have you ever discussed such difficult issues with other people? Is this your first time? Do you do this in other classes as well?”

At the end you may briefly comment on the class: “This discussion was highly interesting for me (even though I have done it already several times). I was surprised by some of your argument (for example, ...). I was not surprised that the rules were never (only a few times) violated, but never intentionally.”

References


Council of Europe (2002). Recommendation Rec (2002)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on education for democratic citizenship. (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 16 October 2002 at the 812th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies)


TASKS:

(1) Go about and explore a version of KMDD with your students in the classroom within the next two weeks. Choose an issue where student participation/student opinions are important to you.

(2) Take notes of your experiences, discuss them within your team and contribute to an evaluation of the method as summary to be posted online and to be present during our next ITV session.

To facilitate this process of scaling-up the method, we recommend

- that each training in this method is accompanied by peer-supervision. Peer-supervision does not only help the learner but is also a very effective way to reduce suspicion against and to raise interest in this method.