Combination of problem-based learning (PBL) and research based learning (RBL): problems and collaborative learning/learning with peers

Simulation is widely used method in teaching. However, often it is used as a kind of roleplay giving quite superficial ideas of the problem at hand. It can also be used otherwise as an opportunity to get deep knowledge and distributed expertise. This could be done by combining PBL and RBL and use simulation as an approach to conflict resolution process.

First, there is a problem (like in PBL), i.e. conflict resolution/peace mediation possibilities in Syria. The learning objective is to understand and critically evaluate this process. Students are divided into groups which act as actors in the conflict. Students together set up the context and construct research problems.

Secondly, students in groups (group work) start to create their working theories and develop understanding of the Syrian situation. They seek information, get deepening knowledge and acquire critical understanding of the situation. Finally they are able to set new, more precise questions, new theories about the peace mediation process in Syria. Learning with peers - discussing concepts, solving problems, presenting group work results, sharing ideas about the possible solutions – makes it interactive and is highly motivating. Students are producing knowledge themselves instead of being passive receivers of knowledge.

Thirdly, the question at hand, conflict resolution possibilities in Syria, is discussed by the groups/actors in their final negotiations (simulation) for which they have negotiated the agenda. The result of the negotiations is the one the participants see possible. Every result as such is a good one.

The idea is to share the research process, interaction in groups and between the groups/learning with peers. Groups act as different parties of the conflict constructing and building up their deepening knowledge of the conflict from their own perspective and sharing their knowledge with their peers. Together they produce a high quality learning process gaining distributed expertise in the Syrian conflict resolution process. Moreover, students get various kinds of skills: communication and negotiation skills, writing skills, presentation skills, argumentation skills, group work skills in producing collaborative papers. Teacher functions as a facilitator. This needs a lot of careful planning in advance. The focus should be on learning instead of teaching, on students’ learning skills, on their learning process towards his/her own expertise.

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