

Reflect and React - Social Media Used to Deepen the Discussion

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Abstract

This paper describes a formative dialogue method using social media. Our project was at first meant to be used to develop and deepen the classroom discussion concerning subjects as xenophobia, human rights and equality, but we soon realized that this dialogue based forum was an extraordinary arena for practising language and central skills pointed out in the Swedish curriculum. In giving the pupils instant feedback during the process, and, thus, instant possibilities to practise and develop their language skills, it is clearly a formative way of working. The teacher or a pupil decides on a topic for discussion, the pupils write in the forum and the teacher and other pupils give feedback and advice on how to evolve the text. We found that this method was very rewarding for the pupils since they could now use their new found knowledge instantly, instead of having to wait, as is often the case in school.

There are great possibilities when it comes to language learning and developing the skills pointed out in the curriculum, such as evaluating the sources, looking at questions from different points of view, using central concepts, reading analytically and writing coherently.

This form of dialogue is also optimal for exchanges with universities and their aspiring teacher students. What better way to prepare to become a teacher than to interact with pupils in authentic situations?

Keywords : *Formative method, instant feedback, dialogue, self- and peer appraisal, source evaluation, social media, language development*

1. How it all began

After having studied and talked about different aspects of human rights, we organized a classroom discussion where the pupils were meant to use their new found knowledge to compare the possibilities different people have in society concerning things as gender, age, wealth and to understand what it is like for people from other cultures to be integrated into a new society.

Topics of this kind, related to human rights and democracy, are not only important in social studies, but they are also a vital part of the Swedish curriculum. Every teacher is obliged to work with the common values stated in the curriculum, no matter which subject you teach. In the Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, it also says that:

“The school should be open to different ideas and encourage their expression. It should emphasise the importance of forming personal standpoints and provide opportunities for doing this.“ [1]

The discussion took an ugly turn when one of the pupils expressed xenophobic views and offended a classmate with another cultural background. The discussion now turned into a debate with locked positions, primarily based on prejudice and emotions. A typical classroom debate has many flaws: it is unequal since there are hierarchies within the group and between the pupil and the teacher. That causes many pupils to remain silent instead of expressing their opinions. It does not give the participants any time to reflect on their views, since it is constrained to a given time and place and often based on emotions rather than facts. We were frustrated and felt the need to find an arena where these discussions could take place. We needed a forum where we had time to reflect, and where every pupil had the same possibility of giving his or her opinion. We wanted facts rather than emotions to provide the basis for the arguments.

Our ICT-advisor presented the idea to move the discussions from the classroom to social media. Together we found the networking tool Ning, which provided us with the necessary components for our discussions. It gives the possibility of inviting those concerned, it lets the pupils create their own pages and it simplifies the use of other media in form of links that the pupils can add or follow.

2. The working process

Each discussion begins with a new topic, suggested by a teacher or a pupil. The topics are always introduced in the classroom to make sure that everyone understands what we are going to discuss and why. Before we begin, we also talk about which skills the pupils are meant to practice and develop. Such skills could for example be to see a topic from many different perspectives, the skill to argue for something, the skill to analyze what other people has written and to evaluate sources. These are all skills pointed out as objectives in the Swedish curriculum. By using an assessment grid, which shows the progressions of the above mentioned skills and which is related to the objectives in the curriculum, we can also show the pupils exactly what it is that will be assessed. This leads to an increased validity in the assessment process. The assessment grid is also a good help for the pupils to understand the feedback they get and when they evaluate themselves.

The pupils write about their ideas, the teachers and the pupils give each other feedback and ask follow up questions. A great help for the teacher, and a great incentive for the pupils, is when you invite experts to participate in the discussions. On one occasion, we chose to invite a policeman who joined the discussion about law and order. The pupils were then able to ask him questions regarding underage consumption of alcohol and drugs. They discussed why some people end up in criminality and other related topics where his experience and special training was of help. Another expert who joined us was a university professor in the science of religion, who contributed with many new sources and perspectives regarding xenophobia and immigration.

The role of the teachers and/or the invited expert is to guide the pupils in their development of the skills and not to get involved in debates with the pupils. At first, our project was meant to be used to develop and deepen the classroom discussions about subjects such as xenophobia, human rights and equality, but we soon realized that this dialogue based forum was an extraordinary arena for language learning. By giving the pupils instant feedback, and, thus, instant possibilities of practising and developing their language skills, it proved to be a formative way of working. Thus, the teacher works on several levels – on the one hand, he guides the pupils in the discussion and helps them develop the above mentioned skills, and at the same time, he can help them advance in their language use. We

wanted to be able to identify the pupils' strengths and weaknesses in their language use, and we wanted to be able help them take the next step in their language development, by giving them constructive feedback during the working process and by allowing them to use their new knowledge immediately. We have chosen to call this a formative dialogue method.

We have also created a support structure to help the pupils in the discussions and the teacher in their feedback. On the one hand, the support structure explains how you can approach a topic using the skills mentioned above (analysing, using sources, arguing, using central concepts etc), and on the other hand it breaks these skills down to help the pupils understand them. For the teachers, this structure is a great help since it points out what the feedback can focus on in order to help the pupils develop their skills.

3. The scientific basis of the dialogue method

We got the inspiration to the dialogue method from the Norwegian professor Olga Dysthe and her work "The multivoiced classroom". Dysthe points out a couple of important parts in the dialogue method. [2]

Secure within the group

At first it is important to create an environment in which all the pupils participate and contribute in the learning process. Pupils, who do not feel secure within the group, are less likely to participate, and, in consequence, also less likely to improve their language skills. Therefore, we have chosen to use a closed network where only those invited are able to participate.

The topics

Secondly the questions has to be open and authentic. An open question is a question that does not have any given answer and that provides and encourages the opportunity of having different points of view. A potential problem with this kind of questions is that the teacher might end up assessing the wrong things.

In order to minimise that risk we use the above mentioned assessment grid. An authentic questions is related to the pupils lives. For example we have had discussions about ideals, peer pressure, grades and how and why girls and boys are treated differently.

Different types of feedback

Another essential part of the dialogue method is the continuous feedback. We work with feedback on several levels. The feedback always concerns a skill that the pupil is meant to develop as opposed to being personal. One type of feedback focuses on the language development of the argumentation linked to the subject. This can for example be advice on how to present your opinion in a clear and convincing way using paragraphs and conjunctions. Another form of feedback has to do with the ability to look at a problem from different points of view or to use different sources to deepen the argumentation and to support your opinion. Given the right feedback, the discussions may lead to a higher order of thinking, as seen in Bloom's taxonomy. The virtual classroom is a suitable arena for giving process oriented types of feedback.

The feedback from the teacher is very important, and in the Swedish anthology Språkboken [3] the advantages of teacher feedback is emphasized, by pointing out that it gives the teacher a chance to

individualize the teaching, to see what kind of help each pupil needs when it comes to content and formalities. The teacher also has the opportunity to show the pupil how to give good and constructive feedback, that is, the teacher is the role model. We believe that this method is very rewarding when it comes to practicing language skills.

Self and peer evaluation

Dysthe argues that the pupils must listen to each other, for example by using other pupils' ideas as a means to develop their own speaking or writing skills. The pupils may refer to what their classmates have said or written, and by doing so they can develop an argument or contradict it. When pupils get used to the method we have noticed that they start to learn from each other. Since the pupils can read all the classmates arguments and feedback they start evaluating themselves by comparing their own arguments to the classmates arguments and feedback. When they start to comment on their classmates arguments they also start a process of peer evaluation. [4]

3.1 The formative method

The formative method is integrated in the dialogue method. In order to be able to develop the pupils' language skills by using a formative method, you have to make sure that these crucial requirements are met:

First of all, it is important that the pupils understand the assignment. Secondly, they have to be made aware of where they are in relation to the objectives, and thirdly, they must be familiar with the objective and what is going to be assessed. The assessment should be an integrated and repeated part of the learning, and it is supposed to help the pupil take his or her next step of development.

4. Evaluation

In Sweden, many schools face the challenge of 1-1, which means that each pupil will get their own computer to use in their school work. To meet this challenge, we need to apply teaching methods that has proven to work and that are in line with our steering documents. The new technology has many possibilities and requires new teaching methods. In the SAMR-model, the American Ph. D. Ruben R. Puentedura, describes how the teaching undergoes four stages when schools implement new technology. In the first two stages, nothing really happens. The computer is simply another tool, used to carry out the usual assignments. In the last two stages, the teaching changes and the content become palpable. Puentedura describes these stages as the teacher modifying and redefining the teaching.[5]

When we use the formative dialogue method, discussing topics in an Internet forum, the pupils have the possibility of reading and re-reading what they and others have written and they can verify the message or contradict it by using other websites or sources. Since we, as teachers, also have the opportunity to comment on the pupils thoughts, they get immediate feedback from many readers and the chance to use the tips right away. The instant response can be compared to a normal classroom activity in which it can sometimes take a long time between the feedback and the next attempt to work with a skill.

In our work, we have been able to conclude that a virtual classroom is democratic since it favours pupils who are not outspoken and who do not have a high status within the group. In a normal classroom debate, these pupils are sometimes invisible, but online many of them feel more secure and are a lot more active. This is of course beneficial for the entire group. Thus, it is fair to say that the use of social media in the classroom is a way of creating the environment Dysthe talks about in her theory. The discussions in social media facilitate a varied language practice by means of a formative dialogue

method. Since it is fun the pupils are very active, even when you do not expect them to be.

Another advantage compared to a classroom debate or discussion is that the pupils are offered more time to interpret the questions, use external sources and reflect.

Yet another advantage is that the pupils are given repeated opportunities to practice and develop their skills. For the teacher these repeated discussions leads to increased reliability concerning the assessment. Furthermore, the variety of topics offer the pupil a possibility to participate in discussions they find interesting.

When the pupils start to communicate with each other, there are often examples not only of peer appraisal, but also of critical questions, for example concerning the facts that were used to support an argument. Apart from strengthening the language skills and the knowledge in the subjects, the work in the social media also strengthened the communication between pupils in real life.

We aspire to develop the method by emphasizing self- and peer evaluation as well as peer-to-peer-feedback. We also aim to involve the pupils even more when it comes to selecting the topics for discussion to make sure that they are authentic. By discussing topics close to the pupils' own lives and interests, we hope to increase their activity further and to give better, individual feedback. Another possible way of developing the work is to cooperate with university students who are preparing themselves to become teachers and to let them do some of their work experience in the virtual classroom.

The Swedish curriculum also points out that :

“Language, learning, and the development of a personal identity are all closely related. By providing a wealth of opportunities for discussions, reading and writing, all pupils should be able to develop their ability to communicate and thus enhance confidence in their own language abilities“ [1].

By using social media in the classroom, we have now found the arena where we can provide the pupils with the above mentioned range of opportunities to discuss, read, write and reflect.

Final words

As we look into the future, we feel that the formative dialogue method we use will be of great help when it comes the skill-based education described by Daniel Clark, Programme Leader for the BSc in Leadership, Enterprise and Management at BPP Business School. In his article “Social Media: Why this Matters To Everyone In Education” Clark points out the necessity of using the same kind of tools in school as the pupils use in their everyday lives. [6]

Our method, which is in a closed forum, provides a secure environment for the pupils where they can express their opinions and practice their skills again and again with qualitative feedback, and we believe that students at many different age levels can benefit from using it.

References

- [1] Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet 2011, Skolverket
- [2] Dysthe, Olga, "Det flerstämmiga klassrummet" [The Multivoiced classroom], Studentlitteratur 1996
- [3] "Språkboken – en antologi om språkundervisning och språkinläring", red. Malmberg, Per; Ferm, Rolf, Skolverket, 2001
- [4] Greczanik, Lisa, "Bloggen möter undervisningen", Natur & Kultur, 2007
- [5] <http://www.hippasus.com/rrpweblog/archives/000049.html>
- [6] "Social Media: Why this Matters To Everyone In Education", Higher Education Teaching and Learning Portal

Below, we have gathered three different responses from the same student, although from three different topics. Between the students responses we have written some examples on how we would give feedback, and tried to explain how we think when we try to help the student develop the skills expressed in the curriculum. This particular student has been using our method since she began year 7 (when she was 13 years old), and she is now in year 8 and we can really notice how she has deepened and developed her way of arguing, using sources, using central concepts and looking at topics from many perspectives.

Example 1 - early on in year 7. The topic was "Why do girls do better in school than boys?"

I don't think that you can say that girls are treated better than boys in general. Sometimes it can be like that in school, but when people start working boys often get a higher pay than girls. I almost think that weighs up for the unfair treatment in school. But I also think it is unfair that teachers and parent are more inclined to believe in girls than boys when something has gone wrong.

Here is a link where you can read more about this.

<http://www.sydsvenskan.se/sverige/article621066/Varfor-har-tjejer-b...>

Teacher's feedback

After a comment like this, our feedback would concern the following things: 1) Use the source in your comment next time. That means that you should say something about what is in the source and why you have chosen it instead of just referring to it with a link. 2) Make sure you begin your comment with a very short introduction explaining the topic and what you will write about.

3) Remember to divide your text into paragraphs.

Example 2 - early in year 8. The topic was "Would it be a good idea to eat vegetarian food once a week in school?"

There is a proposal that we should eat vegetarian food in school one time per week. Is this a good or a bad proposal?

According to the nutritionist Åsa Brugård Konde it would be good to reduce the amount of meat we eat, it would be better for both the health and the environment. Now, we eat about 85 kilos of meat per year and person, and since 1990 this amount has increased with 25 kilos which is a lot.

“Reasons for eating more meat can be that it has become cheaper, but also that we have more money to spend”. You can find more about this on this web page:

http://www.metro.se/noje/svensken-ater-sin-vikt-i-kott-varje-ar/Objiaz!23_0145-65/.

On this page they ask the question if we should stop eating red meat altogether to avoid cancer. The answer is that one shouldn't “stop eating red meat, but rather have a moderate consumption”. They also point out that we need to have a balanced diet with a lot of vegetables and that one has to exercise regularly to avoid cancer.

<http://www.svenskktott.se/faq-naring/ska-vi-sluta-ata-rott-kott/>

If you stop eating meat it will become more difficult for farmers to support themselves since they make money from breeding animals for slaughter, so if we eat less meat than before they won't make as much money as they used to.

Teacher's feedback

In this case the feedback would begin with praise to the student who has made progress since last time. The student's comment starts with a short introduction to the topic and the question which will be discussed. Furthermore, the student looks at positive as well as negative things with the proposal which is one of the skills pointed out in the Swedish curriculum. The student has also used different sources. To further develop the skills the student should focus on the following things: 1) Try to weigh the positive and the negative things to reach a conclusion in a more developed line of arguments. 2) Use the sources more actively in your line of arguments, rather than merely pointing them out. (In this case the teacher would show the student how to make quotations and give references in a text which enables the student to use the sources).

Example 3 - in November in year 8. The topic was “Should we have homework in school?”

One of the questions we discuss most is about homework. Do we need homework? What constitutes a good and meaningful piece of homework? Is the homework an important part of the education?

The advantages with not having homework is that I would be able to do in the afternoons, I can practise my sports and instruments more, hang out with friends etc. Most people I know don't make their homework until the night before it's due which leads to a lot of stress.

If you need help only your parents can help you, and since they often don't think the same way we do in school, they can't help out most of the time. If you take maths as an example, my parents use division in a completely different way than we do in school, so when we try to make homework together we don't understand each other. That makes me annoyed with them, which makes the atmosphere at home worse than if there were no homework to argue about.

“Knowledge is not something you show at a certain date” explains exactly how I feel about this. You shouldn't have to study something and learn it in a week, as is often the case in school. It is better if you work with it for a longer period of time in class with a teacher - then it “sticks” better in my brain, at

least. Here's a link to the newspaper writing about this:

<http://fof.se/tidning/2010/2/laxor-for-livet-eller-i-onodan>

At many schools they have gotten rid of homework altogether. "I don't understand why we should have homework just for the sake of having homework. It is far better if the students work with the assignments during school hours. It is not always the case that the students can get help with their homework at home." says Berit Wikmna, the principal at Botkyrka private school.

I think that what she says sounds good, because it means that I would have more time to do what I want after school, and that I wouldn't have to worry about homework. Here is more about the school and how they work:

<http://www.fria.nu/artikel/80879#ixzz2BesnckpO>

The positive thing with homework can be that there might be something you need to practice more, for example if you risk not passing a certain subject. However, I don't think that all students should have the same homework. It would be better if each individual got the homework they need, so that you get to do something meaningful.

To summarize, I would like to say that if the homework is not individual and designed to help the student become better at something they need, it is not necessary.

Teacher's feedback

In this last comment, the student has developed her skills using the feedback given in the forum and in the classroom. Her introduction is better and the question is presented through several relevant questions that address more than the pros and cons with homework, but also shows that the student has understood that the question is far more complex than the class thought at first. The student uses the sources in a better way than before, she shows that she is learning to refer to the sources correctly. The student still refers to some sources without using them actively in her line of reasoning. Unlike her early contributions, the student is now more intellectually active in the reasoning. She examines the topic from different perspectives, both her own point of view and the views expressed in the sources used.

However, we would still try to give feedback in order to make the student reach an even higher level of reasoning. An example could be to try to find sources that illustrates many different sides of the question.

This text was written by one of our former students, Victoria Karén:

"My name is Victoria Karén and, when I'm writing this, I'm 18 years old. I was one of the first students ever to try this excellent educational method created by Martin Löfgren and Per Ahlkvist.

As you may already know, this blog/site was a way to make the students express their own thoughts and arguments about all kinds of topics. It was supposed to make it easier for the students to really think about how to express themselves, observe and to give us a chance to find source references that we could base our facts on.

When we were introduced to it at first, we just saw it as another assignment that we had to agree on. But as the time passed, we noticed that it actually was a lot of fun and you started to log on by yourself without having anyone telling you that you had to. We got into a lot of heated discussions, and some topics even had “guests” invited (as for example a police man or a teacher from another school) so that we could see things from another point of view.

I think that everyone was amazed by what everyone accomplished. Classmates that hadn’t gotten the chance to open their mouths (because of the much uncontrolled oral discussions in the classroom) suddenly had a lot of thoughts on their mind that they wanted to share.

Another thing that I was struck by was the maturity that hit our arguments. Instead of scrappy texts that lacked fact, they suddenly turned into structured writings. These writings included source references, arguments that showed more than only one version and our own thoughts.

Thanks to this educational tool, it became easier to both write and perform discussions when I reached upper secondary school. We learned how the text should be constructed to reach higher goals, both on theoretical tests and oral.

I must say that this really was a great idea and I wish that we would have something similar in school now. Since the teacher/teachers choose the topics and subjects themselves, it becomes suitable for every age.”

/Victoria

This text was written by another of our former students, Daniel Johansson:

I thought that the system we tried with Per and Martin was brilliant, and modern. Most youths spend a lot of time on their computers when at home, perhaps instead of studying. Therefore it was an advantage that the forum we used for discussing and arguing, was over the internet. It was very smooth, being able to just log in to the forum to write something, and at the same time doing homework that perhaps would not have been done if it was not on the computer!

So for the “lazy” students that chose the computer before homework, this system was amazing.

I also think it was great due to the fact that maybe some students are too shy or nervous to raise their hands, and say something in the class at school, got to have their saying over the computer where no-one could judge them.

The fact that we hired in experts in different subjects on the forum was also brilliant. Instead of having to pay them to show up at school, they can just as the students, log on to the computer and write.

My arguing skills definitely improved, because I was able to argue about what I wanted, when I wanted.

I have had use of these arguing skills not only in schools, writing arguing texts, but in real life as well. Practicing arguing definitely improves your ability of discussing.

The system of having a forum on the internet for students to discuss and getting evaluated by the teachers, was truly amazing. It brought out qualities from shy students that perhaps would not have been seen by the teachers, if the system did not exist.