4 Positive classroom dynamics and culture

As learning a language is a highly social undertaking, the relationship between peers is arguably as critical for learner engagement as the rapport between teacher and students. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016), for example, found that anxiety about speaking up in class was more connected to how learners felt in front of their peers, rather than in front of their teacher. Indeed, few would question Fredricks's (2014) conclusion that in order to be able to fully engage in class, learners need to feel that 'the group is important to them, that they are important to the group, and that they will be cared for and supported (i.e. they are in a safe learning environment)' (p. 183). While agreeing with Fredricks in principle, some teachers would maintain that it is not their job to interfere in peer relations as the latter is simply not part of their main teaching objectives. In this chapter we hope to be able to show that peer relations form the foundation of a positive learning culture and that employing strategies to ensure that everyone feels accepted, valued, safe and included in group life is a profitable part of facilitating engaged, quality learning.

> *Some people may feel that the very act of thinking about group dynamics and how we can affect them suggests manipulation. However, as teachers, we are, whether we like it or not, manipulators of people. Whatever we do, or do not do, in the classroom will have its effect, positive or negative, on the dynamics of the group. Since we are in such a responsible position, I think it only fair that we should be aware of our actions and the possible effects they might be having, and should choose to do those things which are more likely to have a positive effect on the individuals we are dealing with.*
>
> (Hadfield 1992: 13)

REFLECTION TASK 1

Every teacher knows that the atmosphere in a group can make or break the teaching and learning experience for all involved. Yet, it is often so hard to pinpoint what exactly it is about the group that works or does not work. Take a moment to think about a class that 'gels' and one that doesn't. Can you identify any aspects that contribute positively or negatively to the classroom atmosphere?

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rationale

One of the core components of self-determination theory that helps us understand engagement needs is *relatedness* (e.g. Ryan and Deci 2017). In Chapter 3, we considered the teacher-learner relationship, which is defining for the whole atmosphere in any learning group and the culture that emerges, and in the current chapter our focus is on the influence the teacher can have on fostering the relationships among learners. We shall argue that teachers can be 'the invisible hand' (Farmer, McAuliffe Lines and Hamm 2011) that engenders group dynamics, peer relationships and the overall socio-emotional climate in class. In other words, besides the more traditional teacher role of providing guidance for typical school-based values, rules and norms, teachers can also play an invaluable part in facilitating positive peer relationships and the construction of peer norms and values that support social interaction and learning.

> *Students' social and academic lives are intertwined. Peers can provide companionship, emotional support, and validation, and they can help with solving academic problems. Students who have positive relationships with their peers have been found to have higher levels of engagement, motivation, and achievement.*
>
> (Fredricks 2014: 161)

REFLECTION TASK 2

Think about a student you currently teach who you would classify as either highly engaged or highly disengaged. Take a moment to reflect on this student's social network in class (their friends and who they hang out with). How accepted are they by their immediate social group and within the class as a whole? How do their behaviours meet or not meet the overall group's norms and values?

A key notion for effective groups and positive classroom culture is '*psychological safety*' (Edmondson 2019). This is the feeling that learners can speak freely in class, make mistakes or suggest ideas without fear that anyone (teacher or peers) will make fun of them, or embarrass, humiliate, reject, resent or punish them for doing so. Everyone needs to feel safe, not only to make mistakes but also to engage fully without risking bullying. Nobody wants to feel foolish, laughed at or excluded – indeed, Kohn (2006: 103) is absolutely right that 'Few things stifle creativity like the fear of being judged or humiliated.' Indeed, humans go to great lengths to avoid feelings of social awkwardness, no matter what age they are! Particularly in the inherently stressful context of using a foreign language, it is vital that teachers develop a culture where psychological safety is the norm, so that learners can be confident of a supportive response from everyone, no matter what linguistic slip-ups they make. Psychological safety does not

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

always mean everyone is in agreement or that nobody faces criticism or correction: it is not false harmony. Rather, it means always treating each other and the shared goal of language learning with respect, accepting differences and being supportive of each other as individuals.

> *In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake, others will not penalize or think less of them for it. They also believe that others will not resent or humiliate them when they ask for help or information. This belief comes when people both trust and respect each other, and it produces a sense of confidence that the group won't embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up. Thus, psychological safety is a taken-for-granted belief about how others will respond when you ask a question, seek feedback, admit a mistake or propose a possibly wacky idea.*
>
> (Edmondson 2019: 118–119)

Principles for Positive Group Dynamics and Classroom Culture

What can teachers do to foster a healthy learning environment within their classroom? We believe that the psychological safety of a classroom culture can be best captured by drawing on the principles of *group dynamics*, originally developed in social psychology (e.g. Lewin 1947) and later adopted for understanding educational groups (e.g. Schmuck and Schmuck 2001) as well as group processes in language learning (e.g. Dörnyei and Murphey 2003). Aspects of group dynamics have been successfully linked to motivation to learn (e.g. Dörnyei and Muir 2019) and student engagement (e.g. Juvonen, Espinoza and Knifsend 2012; Lynch, Lerner and Leventhal 2013). Past research has examined a wide range of group characteristics, from group development to group roles; our current focus will be on two aspects in particular: how the quality of the relationship between group members affects their willingness to engage, and how teachers as group leaders can positively influence this process.

> *Although the scientific investigations of group work are but a few years old, I don't hesitate to predict that group work – that is, the handling of human beings not as isolated individuals, but in the social setting of groups – will soon be one of the most important theoretical and practical fields. … There is no hope for creating a better world without a deeper scientific insight into the … essentials of group life.*
>
> (Lewin 1943, cited in Johnson and Johnson 2017: 2)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Principle 1: Lead by Example

As noted in Chapter 3, the teacher's actions are defining for the climate and attitudes that develop in class. It is not only what we say but how we act that sends messages to learners about what is acceptable or not. This has been articulated expressively in the Chinese proverb, 'Not the cry, but the flight of a wild duck leads the flock to fly and follow.' The 'lead-by-example' principle, which is one of the main laws of effective leadership in business management, states that leaders set an example and model behaviour through their daily acts. In a similar way, teachers, as group leaders, can also do much to manage the atmosphere and culture that emerges in their classes by how they behave.

> *The most powerful thing a leader can do to mobilize others is to set the example by aligning personal actions with shared values. Leaders are measured by the consistency of their deeds and words – by walking the talk. … Leaders take every opportunity to show others by their own example that they're deeply committed to the values and aspirations they espouse.*
>
> (Kouzes and Posner 2004: 12)

We have discussed earlier the importance of an autonomy-supportive leadership approach which enables learners to become involved and direct their learning experiences to some degree. However, teachers can also be thought of as having one of three styles of leadership: *autocratic*, *democratic* or *laissez-faire* (Lewin, Lippitt and White 1939). As the labels suggest, an autocratic leader has complete control of the group and a laissez-faire leader does little in the way of leadership, leaving the group to their own devices. From a student engagement point of view, neither of these extremes can be seen as especially effective, although we must note that at different stages of group development the optimal leadership style varies somewhat, with a more autocratic style benefiting the group at the beginning and a more laissez-faire at a mature stage (see Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson 2008).

The most effective leadership style in most teaching contexts is usually the democratic one, where the leader leads the group but also shares some power with the group members concerning the decision-making processes. Such leadership tends to be typified by friendly, open communication and better relationships within the group, as well as between the leader and the group (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003). However, it is worth mentioning that being a democratic leader can also be done badly; to know when to take a strong leadership role, when to democratise decisions and when to intervene requires teachers to have a broad range of classroom management and interpersonal skills to draw on (we shall revisit this question in the last Action Point).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *Democratic leadership is sometimes mistaken for laissez-faire leadership, although, in fact, a 'democratic' leader does exert authority, but in a way that respects the constant need for balance between structure and freedom.*
>
> (Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998: 160)

REFLECTION TASK 3

In his book on *Classroom Management Techniques*, Scrivener (2012: 53) puts three important (and somewhat rhetorical) questions for teachers to consider concerning the quantity of control in the classroom:

1. Is it possible that over-organising by the teacher takes away or reduces the students' own ability or willingness to take decisions, self-evaluate and organise?
2. Would learning be more focussed if students had a larger degree of control over what they did?
3. Would activities actually run smoother and more efficiently without the constant interventions (or possibly interference) from the teacher?

As teachers, we may find that we inadvertently prefer to work with learners who are more compliant and more willing to take part in activities as we intend, as opposed to the more difficult students who can be disruptive or disengaged. The problem is we may directly or indirectly be communicating this to all the learners in class, as well as the specific individuals. One of our roles is to model inclusivity. This means finding the positives in every learner, even those where we may need to look a little harder. Sometimes creativity and originality can be found in those learners who do not conform, and harnessing these positively can be enriching for everyone. A culture of inclusivity means teachers need not only to attend to how they model inclusivity in their treatment of all learners in class, but also to take note of which learners may be excluded by their peers and find ways to consciously ensure they are included. This may involve making explicit decisions about assigning group composition or pair work teams. Ideally, nobody should be left out or made to feel an 'outsider'. However, we acknowledge that this is not always easy, and some learners may prefer themselves for a number of reasons to stay more on the periphery (we shall discuss this issue further below).

REFLECTION TASK 4

What kind of leader do you think you are in your classrooms and, perhaps more importantly, how do you think the students view you? Does this change across time and context? If so, what kind of things affect your leadership style?

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Principle 2: Promote Group Cohesiveness

In the work on group dynamics, perhaps the key factor contributing to positive group atmosphere and culture has been recognised as *group cohesiveness*. This refers to the closeness of the group and the feeling of 'us' among the members. If learners feel a strong sense of belonging to a cohesive group, they are more likely to actively participate in classroom life. A cohesive group has a climate of solidarity and unity among the members and is less likely to dissolve or disintegrate into cliques (Forsyth 2019). Moreover, what is particularly important from an educational point of view is that it is also more productive. Johnson and Johnson (2017) explain that under most conditions, the productivity of groups in general is higher than that of individuals working alone, but this productivity further increases with improved interpersonal relationships amongst the students. They report on a meta-analysis of 148 studies involving more than 17,000 early adolescents in 11 countries, which found that as much as 33% of the students' achievement was explained by peer relationships. Knowing the number of other factors that affect success in learning (e.g. aptitude, motivation, family background), this is a massive proportion, and the authors' advice, thus, is unequivocal: 'if teachers want to increase early adolescents' achievement, they should facilitate the development of friendships' (p. 100). Translated into group dynamics terms, teachers should promote group cohesiveness.

FURTHER BENEFITS OF INCREASED GROUP COHESIVENESS

Increased group cohesiveness will typically result in an increase in:

- members' commitment to group goals
- feelings of personal responsibility to the group
- willingness to take on difficult tasks
- persistence in working toward goal achievement
- satisfaction and morale
- commitment to one another's learning growth and success

(Johnson and Johnson 2017: 99–100)

The core components of group cohesiveness include *interpersonal acceptance* (i.e. positive, non-judgemental attitudes towards each other), *group pride* (i.e. appreciation of the group as a whole and being proud to be part of it) and *task commitment* (i.e. collective interest in and commitment to the task – language learning in our case) (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003). Group cohesiveness is obviously a generally positive feature of a class, but too much of it can lead to a lack of individualism and a risk of 'groupthink', that is, a state when loyalty to the group is so strong that all conflict and critical thinking is avoided (Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998). Naturally, it is healthy in any classroom, and especially language classrooms, to retain an openness to diversity of people and opinions, and to also be welcoming to newcomers who may join the group at a

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

later stage. Some of the best discussions in a language class depend on disagreement and a willingness to express this. The key is having a healthy group climate and mutual respect, which allow diverse opinions to be expressed and considered without aggression or rejection of the individual. Harmony within a group does not mean blind, universal agreement.

> *Belonging feels like it happens from the inside out, but in fact it happens from the outside in. Our social brains light up when they receive a steady accumulation of almost-invisible cues:* We are close, we are safe, we share a future.
>
> (Coyle 2018: 25–26)

A particular context in which group cohesiveness is especially strong is in *teams,* and this notion can be useful to guide our understanding of how to build teams, not merely groups in our classrooms. Although 'small group' and 'team' are often used interchangeably in the literature, it may be useful to separate the two terms, with a team being a subset of small groups that is made up of members with a salient, well-defined shared purpose that binds them together into a cohesive unit (Edmondson 2019). This is common, in sports contexts – it is easy to see, for example, that a basketball team will require more in terms of collaboration from the members than, say, a committee. Ideally, we want learners to work together on tasks with a sense of being a team. This 'team feeling' can be engendered through setting team accountability (rather than merely individual accountability) – which is of course typical of sports teams – and by celebrating team success. Of course, people cannot be forced to feel team spirit and group identity; these emerge from the way the members respond to and interact with each other, and this is an area where technology can be very helpful: setting up a group to exchange instant messages or providing a forum or message board can make instant communication effortless and can contribute to setting the tone and enhancing the relational quality in the group.

GOOGLE'S RESEARCH ON HIGH-FUNCTIONING TEAMS

Five factors which contribute to effective teams:

1. **Psychological safety** – team members feel safe, trust each other and are comfortable being vulnerable in front of each other
2. **Dependability** – team members can depend on each other
3. **Structure and clarity** – team members have clear roles and goals
4. **Meaning** – the work and goals are meaningful to the team members
5. **Impact** – the team members feel their work and contribution matters

(Based on Winsborough 2017: 68)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

REFLECTION TASK 5

How cohesive do you judge your class to be? To what extent are there positive relationships and a sense of friendship among all members? How closely do the students identify with the group as a whole? How focused are they on working together to help each other improve their language skills? Is there an area (e.g. interpersonal relationships, group pride, task commitment) you feel needs developing?

Principle 3: Promote TEA Among Learners: Trust, Empathy and Acceptance

A prerequisite for a cohesive group is the members' ability to exercise constructive interpersonal skills. These not only lubricate the smooth functioning of teamwork and contribute towards creating a sense of psychological safety, but are also indispensable skills for language learners to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds in various crosscultural settings. From among the relevant aspects of socio-emotional competence, we have chosen to compress core components into the acronym *TEA – Trust*, *Empathy* and *Acceptance*.

> *When teachers consciously create caring relationships and teach relationship skills, they build a strong foundation of safety and trust. Studies show that this increased safety and trust result in more cooperation, less conflict, and fewer verbal put downs in the classroom … In addition, better scores on standardized achievement tests and improved ability to acquire skills have been reported.*
>
> (Hart and Hodson 2004: 16)

Trust is the basis on which social relationships are built. It takes time to generate but, sadly, it can be broken in an instant. Rather than grand gestures, trust tends to emerge from the small daily interactions between people in class. It is dependent on the consistency and reliability with which people act and respond and whether they meet others' expectations and needs. Being able to rely on others and trust how they will respond is a core contributor to psychological safety. In a caring and compassionate classroom, there will be trust not only between teacher and students but also among the students. Key scholars on trust in schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002), propose that trust emerges from four components: *respect*, *competence*, *personal regard for others* and *integrity*. Another definition is offered by Tschannen-Moran (2014), who lists the five facets of trust: *benevolence*, *honesty*, *openness*, *reliability* and *competence*. The different labels, however, do converge into a composite attribute which is arguably the most fundamental characteristic of strong relationships, and what is important to highlight here is that this composite trustworthiness is not only fully under each individual's conscious control, but can also be taught and enhanced by teacher actions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Empathy lies at the heart of positive relations (see also Chapter 3). It requires a person to try to see the world from somebody else's point of view, imagining not only what they are thinking but also what they are feeling. The aim is not to agree but to seek to understand the other person's thoughts and feelings and communicate this understanding to them. Not only is this a critical skill for us as educators to model in our own behaviours – Carl Rogers (1983) listed empathy amongst the three basic attributes of a good facilitator, alongside acceptance (unconditional positive regard) and congruence (being genuine and authentically connected) – but it is something we can explicitly try to foster in our learners. It is perhaps the cornerstone of positive classroom dynamics and a culture of relational support and kindness. An excellent illustration of an educational intervention focusing on teaching empathy is Gordon's (2009) *Roots of empathy* programme in Canada (see panel below).

ROOTS OF EMPATHY

Roots of Empathy is an international, evidence-based classroom programme that has shown significant effect in raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy. It is designed for children aged 5 to 13 and involves a detailed curriculum. At the heart of the programme are a local infant and parent who visit the classroom every three weeks over the school year, and a trained instructor who coaches students to observe the baby's development and to label the baby's feelings. Thus, in this experiential learning, the baby is the 'Teacher' and a lever, which the instructor uses to help the participants to identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others.

(adapted from https://rootsofempathy.org/roots-of-empathy)

Acceptance means creating an inclusive classroom in which every person is accepted by the others for who they are, irrespective of their differences, strengths and weaknesses. It does not mean always having to like a student who, for example, may be disruptive, aggressive or bullying. Such cases will require teacher intervention but in a way that communicates a willingness to listen and seek to understand that person and try to help them.

> *[Acceptance] is prizing the learner, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person. It is a caring for the learner, but a nonpossessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in her own right. It is a basic trust – a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy.*
>
> (Rogers 1983: 124)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

FIVE KEY FACTORS PROMOTING ACCEPTANCE IN GROUPS

1. *Learning about each other:* This is the most crucial and general factor fostering relationships within a group, involving the students sharing genuine personal information with each other.
2. *Proximity, contact* and *interaction:* Proximity refers to the physical distance between people, contact to situations where learners can meet and communicate spontaneously, and interaction to special contact situations in which the behaviour of each person influences the others'. These three factors are effective natural gelling agents, which highlight the importance of classroom management issues such as the seating plan, small group work and independent student projects.
3. *Cooperation toward common goals:* Superordinate goals that require the cooperation of everybody to achieve them have been found to be the most effective means of bringing together – even openly hostile parties.
4. *Extracurricular activities:* These represent powerful experiences, partly because during such outings students lower their 'school filter' and relate to each other as 'civilians' rather than students.
5. *Teacher's role modelling:* Friendly and supportive behaviour by the teacher is infectious, and students are likely to follow suit.

(adapted from Dörnyei and Muir 2019)

Principle 4: Foster a Culture of Collaboration and Support

The 'culture' of an organisation – including a school and a language classroom – refers to a set of emerging norms, values, beliefs and expectations that govern social relations and community life. To put it simply, it is 'the way we do things around here', and Xenikou and Furnham (2013) highlight its durability when they state that culture can be seen as 'what is passed on to new generations of group members' (p. 100). To create a learning environment in which engagement can flourish, we need to generate a culture that values the active investment of students in the learning process. This requires students to be supportive of each other and accepting of those who want to work beyond the norm. In many classrooms, however, this condition clashes with counterproductive peer pressure, that is, the pressure to follow the influence of peers and conform to a 'norm of mediocrity'. Such pressure affects everyone at every age but is especially acute in the teenage years. As a child, one of your parents or grandparents may have warned you 'not to get in with the wrong sort' and there is in fact good logic behind this advice: friendship and peer groups share values and characteristics and there are processes of contagion that ensure that group beliefs are spread among the members. In respect to engagement, this means that we may find friendship groups which are supportive and contribute positively to engagement, whereas others may pressure their peers not to engage. Our aim is to spread 'the engagement bug' across the whole class and create an atmosphere in which being engaged is not something to be mocked or embarrassed about (for more discussion, see Action Point 4).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *Children imitate friends' school-related behaviours and goals, and these actions and attitudes have the effect of encouraging or discouraging their participation in scholastic activities. The implication is that friends positively influence children's school engagement when they value schoolwork and participate willingly in classroom activities, but have the opposite effect when they disparage school and withdraw or rebel against the academic milieu.*
>
> (Ladd, Herald-Brown and Kochel 2009: 323)

Developing supportive and collaborative relationships also needs learners who know how to work well together. Just putting people together and asking them to successfully cooperate – as we so often do in communicative classrooms – is often insufficient. To help things work effectively, it can be useful to assign individuals specific roles, which not only instruct them about what their specific contribution should be but which also give students a direct inroad into becoming part of the action; to put it broadly, by starting to act out the roles students have something to do – that is, get engaged! – straight away. Action Points 3 and 4 will offer specific advice on what roles to set and when, but here we would like to highlight a possible consequence of a lack of roles: 'social loafing'. This is when an individual does not make much effort in group work, relying instead on others to pick up the slack. Explicit roles can counteract this as they create a sense of accountability and make visible every person's output and contribution.

WORKING WITH PEERS

When working together, peers can influence each other's engagement and cognitive development by:

- Providing feedback
- Debating ideas
- Asking questions
- Asking for justifications
- Providing elaborations
- Sharing strategies
- Offering suggestions and explanations
- Redefining problems

(based on Fredricks 2014: 169)

An often underutilised strategy to foster supportive relationships among peers is *peer mentoring*, in which specifically assigned peers teach and encourage – that is, mentor – each other. If the brief of each peer mentor is to recognise their mentees' strengths and to help them to build on these, peer mentoring can literally do wonders, and not only for the receiver: the mentor will also gain confidence and experience of leadership. Of course,

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such a process does not emerge spontaneously but requires a structure and format in place, including allocated time, space and some initial training on how best to mentor each other. Peer mentoring is also increasingly used both in secondary and higher education to provide support for new, incoming students so that they can adopt the institute's culture and achieve their full potential. There is no reason why such mentoring provision should not have a prominent focus on encouraging engagement, and as the mentors in such programmes are usually students from higher classes, their 'authorisation' of engagement will be seen by students as a permit to do well.

REFLECTION TASK 6

If you think about your classes, what kind of socialisation culture would you say exists in regard to engagement? Do you witness instances of positive peer pressure to engage with learning opportunities or more pressure to disengage or downplay commitment to learning? What specific behaviours are illustrative of this in your classes?

Principle 5: Resolve Conflict Constructively and Respectfully

The topics of conflict and discipline were already addressed in the previous chapter, but these are such important issues that it warrants some further discussion. No matter how hard we work on teaching interpersonal skills and seek to foster a positive climate in class, there will be occasions when we need to intervene in conflict and exercise some form of disciplining or conflict resolution. How we do this speaks volumes about our values and our relational stance; it is often during these critical incidents that we communicate powerful implicit messages to learners about respect, trust, tolerance, acceptance, compassion and kindness. The challenge is to resolve conflict in ways which meet the expectations of our roles (and responsibilities) as educators and yet which also contribute to building up a positive learner community. The secret of achieving these two things simultaneously is to bear in mind that, as Roffey (2011) points out, in a relational classroom, the teacher can be in charge *without* being controlling. Teachers, by dint of their position, have more power than the students, but this can be used for democratic participation in order to give learners agency and voice in shaping and creating the social context of their classroom and behavioural expectations.

> *Time devoted to initial positive group dynamics is like taking immunity shots before travelling – it can make a lot of potentially serious problems unrealisable. But we still might have a few bumps and surprises.*
>
> (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003: 135)

It is useful to distinguish *disciplining* and *conflict resolution* from each other. Put simply, disciplining follows breaking a rule or violating a group norm. These instances should be addressed consistently and firmly, focusing on the

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dysfunctional impact of the behaviour, and communicating and enforcing the consequences with respect. The notion of acceptance discussed earlier also dictates that if a student has to be disciplined, it is also important that they should know that the relationship is not damaged by this instance and that they are still appreciated as individuals. Indeed, this is the opportunity for rebuilding trust and showing the relationship is still intact.

> *Children will break rules, even rules they cherish and respect because they helped create them. The way we manage the rule breaking is critical to the development of community. The way we attend to children when the rules are broken is critical to the development of discipline.*
>
> (Charney 2015: 144)

Conflicts are different from disciplinary matters (although they can lead to them) in that they refer to disagreements over issues or between group members. From a group dynamics vantage point, the appraisal of conflict is somewhat ambiguous. Although conflicts were traditionally seen as disruptive (because they impede task performance and spoil student relations), Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), for example, devote a whole chapter to discussing the subject and argue that if they are managed well, conflicts have the potential to be beneficial in at least four ways:

- *Conflicts can increase student involvement* (a heated discussion that is resolved satisfactorily draws the parties into a deeper commitment).
- *Conflicts can provide an outlet for hostility* (instead of festering when bottled-up).
- *Conflicts can promote group cohesiveness* (one of the main principles of group development is that in order to mature, groups need to go through a turbulent stage when issues are aired and resolved).
- *Conflicts can increase group productivity* (by promoting critical thinking and improving task-specific procedures).

> *Disagreement about ideas is a healthy sign as long as intellectual disagreement does not degenerate into sharp interpersonal conflict. Some interpersonal conflict is inevitable and should not be taken as a sign of failure. Nor should it be an opportunity for you to intervene and take over the reins immediately, acting as arbiter, juror, and judge.*
>
> (Cohen and Lotan 2014: 137)

The key notion in constructive conflict management is *negotiation.* Open discussion can defuse disputes and bring people together. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) stress that the teacher's lead in being able to talk calmly

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and openly about the issues and to show respect for diverse opinions will provide an important model for the students. Ideally, a conflict is best resolved directly by the opposing parties themselves, but sometimes when the animosity is so great that it prevents constructive interaction, a third party is needed to act as a *mediator*. An important aspect of mediation is to make the two parties see each other's points, to resolve misunderstandings and to encourage a solution where there is no winner and loser. Here the skills of empathy play an important role in helping the parties, not to agree but to try to understand the other person's perspective.

> *Just as conflicts escalate when group members become firmly committed to a position and will not budge, conflicts de-escalate when group members are willing to negotiate with others to reach a solution that benefits all parties. Negotiation is a reciprocal communication process whereby two or more parties to a dispute examine specific issues, explain their positions, and exchange offers and counteroffers.*
>
> (Forsyth 2019: 431)

DURING MEDIATION, ASK THE PARTIES:

- to describe what happened and how they feel;
- to paraphrase the *other's* position and how the *other* feels;
- to tell each other what they can do to avoid the conflict in the future;
- to search for a solution, going back and forth between the parties;
- to repeat the solution they have found and agreed on.

(adapted from Dörnyei and Murphey 2003: 152)

A specific approach to relational ways of dealing with conflicts and resulting discipline problems can be found in the growing interest in *restorative justice* in schools. This refers to a radical approach to discipline originating in the criminal system but also used increasingly in schools with positive effects such as reduced bullying and antisocial behaviour, improved attendance, better group and community dynamics, enhanced interpersonal skills for the learners, and overall less classroom disruption and more time on task (Evans and Lester 2013; Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley and Petrosino 2016; Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles and Espelage 2016). Essentially, the approach gives each individual in a conflict situation the chance to understand how their behaviour affects others, possibly also through mediation with others in the group. They are encouraged to switch perspectives and listen to each other through open discussions where everyone concerned feels safe and respected. The person who caused the issue has to reflect on ways of making right the wrong. The method may not suit everybody or every school, and there remains controversy about its effectiveness as a challenge to zero-tolerance

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

policy approaches to discipline, but it is certainly an approach which underlines many of the values conducive to engagement – respect, safety, inclusion, relationships, pro-social behaviours, open dialogue and trust.

REFLECTION TASK 7

Think of a conflict you have witnessed in your own or somebody else's class. How do you think the two parties were feeling at that moment? Why might they have acted the way that they did? How did you or the observed teacher feel at that moment? How might this have affected your response in dealing with the conflict? Could anything have been done differently to prevent this happening or to deal with it differently in retrospect?

Teacher Actions

All of the five principles discussed in the first half of the chapter centre on the notion of creating a positive, encouraging and safe classroom environment in which there is a focus on quality relationships among peers, as well as a culture for engaging in language learning. There are many aspects of the behaviour of the teacher as the group leader which can promote such a climate, and in order to offer some practical suggestions we have selected five specific action areas that in our experience are particularly relevant to implementing these principles in language classrooms: connecting learners with each other personally; developing a sense of 'we' and 'us' in the classroom; preparing learners for groupwork and cooperation; structuring the class using the three 'R's – rules, roles and routines; and, finally, fostering democratic learner participation.

Action 1: Connect Learners Personally

A bottom-up strategy for enhancing the whole class dynamics is to work at ensuring that all the learners have some kind of relationship with each other. It is hoped that this personal connection will reduce the risk of cliques, bullying or any learner being excluded. Principle 3 concerned the building of trust, empathy and acceptance (TEA) in the classroom, and key elements of this process include getting learners to have contact and interact with each other, to learn more about each other and to cooperate with each other. An advantage of language education is that there are plenty of opportunities for learners to work together and get to know each other personally during L2 classes. These opportunities can be utilised to consciously work at mixing up the students to ensure they connect with each other personally. Here we would like to highlight three key aspects of the group formation process: using *icebreakers* and *warmers*; the significance of knowing each other's *names*; and the usefulness of *groupwork*.

Icebreakers are designed to be used in the first couple of meetings of a newly formed group or when a large new intake joins the group. According

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to Frank and Rinvolucri (1991: 9), the purpose of these short tasks is 'to get people to ... become aware of each other as people ... to relax people, get them to unfold their arms, to smile and to laugh. ... In doing these exercises people learn a little about other group members consciously and a vast amount unconsciously'. This latter function – unconsciously collecting information about each other – is vital from the point of view of the development of cohesiveness: seeing the others moving, hearing their voices, talking to them and establishing personal relationships with everybody will result in a strong sense of familiarity surprisingly quickly.

FUNCTIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ICEBREAKERS

- Creating opportunities for everybody to talk to everybody else, even if only briefly (e.g. conducting a mini-survey)
- Involving sharing personal information (e.g. self-disclosure games)
- Involving action and movement (e.g. games involving throwing beanbags)
- Moving people around in the classroom (e.g. getting students into various groups)
- Involving humor and laughter (to lighten the atmosphere)
- Utilising various interaction formats (e.g. pairs, small groups, altogether)
- Requiring cooperation (e.g. small-group competition)

Initial ice-breaking, however, might not be enough, because until the climate warms sufficiently, ice has a habit of re-forming. For this reason, most groups need a period of readjustment each time they come together, a time to rejoin the group, to accept each other again, to re-establish relationships, and to remind themselves implicitly of the goals and rules of the group. These are the invaluable functions of *warmers*, designed to be used at the beginning of every lesson.

The significance of knowing each other's names. Not knowing the others' names in the class has a far more serious consequence than most teachers would assume. Students who think that their peers or the teacher do not know their names will often feel that they are invisible in the group – the sense of being anonymous almost amounts to the feeling that one does not exist in that group. Thus, in our haste to get through the curriculum, we run the danger of leaving some students behind, and with a feeling of being insignificant, if we do not ensure not only that we as teachers know learner names but also that the learners know each other's names too.

> *If you don't know their names, students are just anonymous members of class. Knowing and using a name acknowledges each person as an individual, someone you pay attention to and are interested in.*
>
> (Scrivener 2012: 76)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Groupwork is known to be an effective format for practice in communicative language teaching, but from our current perspective its primary importance lies in its creating proximity, contact, interaction and cooperation amongst the members of a small group. There is an impressive body of social research to show that when people work together in groups this affects their feelings for one another in positive ways: they are more likely to form friendly ties and develop trust for one another, and group activities are particularly beneficial in establishing harmonious interracial relations in desegregated classrooms (for a good summary, see Cohen and Lotan 2014).

There are four main options for setting up groups: the teacher deliberately and purposefully allocates groupings; the teacher engenders random groupings (e.g. by drawing lots); the learners choose their own groupings; and a mixture of teacher- and learner-defined groups. Clearly, there are times when it can be beneficial for learners to choose their own partners and especially at the outset if they are nervous, it can give learners security to have familiar friends to work with. However, there is a danger of fixed cliques forming, which are unhealthy for the class of the whole. Teachers may also want to deliberately separate some learners or put specific learners together. Random groupings are popular, especially as they seem 'fair' to all concerned and offer an element of excitement. A mixed version involves the learners picking their own partners but under certain conditions, for example 'not with any person they have already worked with that week or month'. (Action Point 3 will discuss ways of preparing learners for participating in groupwork effectively.)

> *If a teacher wants to produce active learning, then groupwork, properly designed, is a powerful tool for providing simultaneous opportunities for all class members. Small groups are not a panacea for all instructional problems. They are only one tool, useful for specific kinds of teaching goals and especially relevant for classrooms where students have a wide mix of previous academic achievement and proficiency in the language of instruction.*
>
> (Cohen and Lotan 2014: 1)

Action 2: Develop a Sense of 'We' and 'Us'

We saw in Principle 2 that the essence of positive group dynamics is that the learners share a sense of cohesiveness that emerges from positive group relationships, task orientation and group pride. Ideally, we want all the learners to identify and feel a sense of belonging with the group as a whole. However, we are also aware how difficult this can be in some cases. Forsyth (2019), for example, discusses a continuum of inclusion/exclusion in a group stretching from maximum group inclusion to maximum exclusion or ostracism. Understanding group membership on a continuum

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

helps us to understand two facets: (1) the group may accept members to differing degrees, and (2) different learners may need and want to be involved to varying degrees. As an educator, we want the group to be accepting and open to all members, with a flexibility for individuals to commit in a way and at a pace they feel comfortable with.

One of the most remarkable aspects of groups is that given appropriate conditions for group development, a 'we' feeling can emerge *regardless of*, or even *in spite of*, the initial intermember likes and dislikes – in a well-functioning group, initial attraction bonds are gradually replaced by a deeper and steadier type of interpersonal relationship: *acceptance* (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003). How can this happen? The previous Action Point already presented some ways to promote the 'gelling process' within a group, and the following six factors have also been found highly instrumental to this effect.

- *Shared goals*. It is useful to initiate explicit discussions about what we want to accomplish in the class and how students can see themselves using the learnt language in the future. At the beginning of the school year, the group can be encouraged to set specific goals that they want everyone to achieve and to reflect on ways to ensure that collectively the whole group can reach these targets.

> *Creating engagement around a clear, simple set of priorities can function as a lighthouse, orienting behaviour and providing a path toward a goal.*
>
> (Coyle 2018: 210)

- *Extracurricular activities* can be a powerful way to form bonds. They can offer a chance to create shared memories and experiences which can gel the class together more tightly, and savouring the positive memories together can foster the positive group identity. Not only do students lower their 'school filter' during these times and act more like their real selves, but these activities can usually offer students a variety of positive roles to experiment with and, if successful, to adopt. Companies sometimes organise cohesion-building outdoor experiences for their employees which include a series of challenges that they must deal with as a team (e.g. rock climbing or whitewater rafting). While undergoing such joint hardship together, people tend to do things for one another to lessen the difficulty and to overcome the obstacles, which in turn enhances solidarity and affiliation. Coping with a difficult situation together creates a sense of group achievement and becomes an indelible element of the group's history.
- *Competition* is an interesting dimension to consider in respect to group cohesiveness. There is a recognised rationale for organising competition

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with other classes, in order to strengthen the within-class bonds through functioning as a team, and small-group competitions within class can serve the same purpose. However, competition should be used with caution: it can indeed boost motivation, be great fun and strengthen group cohesiveness, but used poorly, it risks isolating some learners, creating in and out-groups, having winners and by default also losers, as well as focusing on the output / end result as opposed to the process of learning. Shindler (2010) offers some guidelines for 'healthy competitions', including having only rewards of symbolic value, keeping competitions short and sweet, ensuring everyone feels they could win, and making sure the process and not the winning are foregrounded.

- *Group legend*. A further important factor fostering cohesiveness is *group legends*. Hadfield (1992) underlines that successful groups (and, we may add, also youth gangs) often create a kind of 'group mythology', which includes giving the group a name and inventing special group characteristics (e.g. a dress code) in order to enhance the feeling of 'groupness'. Group members may also be encouraged to establish group rituals, create a semi-official group chronicle, prepare 'group objects' and symbols (such as flags or coats of arms) and find or create appropriate group mottoes and logos.
- *Public commitment and investing in the group*. Public commitment to the group strengthens a sense of belonging, and can be made more salient by formalised group agreements and contracts. Wearing school colours or t-shirts are another way of doing this. In addition, when members spend a considerable amount of time and effort contributing to the group's goals (e.g. completing a major project), this will increase their commitment towards these goals and towards the group in general. In other words, psychological membership develops faster after some personal involvement in acts of actual membership, especially if publicly acknowledged.
- Finally, in a section focusing on 'we' and 'us' it is necessary to also talk about the discrimination between 'us' and 'them' – that is, *defining the group against another* – as a possible group-building tool. The reason why we need to address this question is because this strategy is extremely powerful but equally dangerous. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) warn us that although the rivalry between classes (as in a sport competition), for example, is highly effective in uniting people within each class, it can easily shift into stirring up emotions against the outgroup in order to strengthen ingroup ties (i.e. 'us' versus 'them') – indeed, politicians sometimes deliberately create external enemy images in order to strengthen their popularity and their country's internal unity. Within and between classes, we need to take care how and when an 'us-and-them' discourse emerges.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

WHO WE ARE – AN ALL-STAR CLASS! (CLASS DISPLAY)

Everyone has strengths and it is important for individuals and the groups to recognise these strengths in each other. Early on in a group's time together, it can be useful for the group to survey themselves, each reporting on something they are good at – related to language learning or otherwise. This can be displayed as a group collage (digitally or on a poster). During the term, as the class gets to know each other, other activities can include getting peers to compliment each other and add positive comments to the group collage when somebody does something kind for somebody else. Supporting learners in looking for the good in each other and ensuring everybody's strengths are recognised is invaluable for the group liking and appreciating each other.

Action 3: Prepare Learners for Groupwork and Cooperation

Groupwork has the potential to produce more active, engaged and task-oriented learner behaviour than any other teaching formats, and in their authoritative overview, Cohen and Lotan (2014: 3) report that even students 'who usually do anything but what they are asked to do' become actively engaged with their work and are 'held there by the action of the group'. However, we should not assume that students instinctively know how to work with each other in a constructive and cooperative manner; they will need to perform some communicative functions in which they may not have any experience – especially in the L2 – and they may need to adjust their mindset to working in tandem with others rather than purely pursuing individual rewards (as is traditionally the case in education). The three basic strategies to prepare learners for groupwork and cooperation involve relevant *skill-building*, *norm-setting,* and *role assignment*.

FIVE WAYS OF MOTIVATING COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN SMALL GROUPS

1. *Structuring the goal*. Groups work towards a single team product (e.g. joint performance).
2. *Structuring the rewards*. In addition to individual scores/grades, some sort of team score is also calculated and joint rewards/grades are given for the group's overall production.
3. *Structuring student roles*. Assigning roles to every group member so that everybody has a specific responsibility (e.g. 'explainer', 'summariser', or 'note-taker').
4. *Structuring materials*. Either limiting resources so that they must be shared (e.g. one answer sheet for the whole group) or giving out resources (e.g. worksheets, information sheets) which need to be fitted together (i.e. the jigsaw procedure).
5. *Structuring rules*. Setting rules which emphasise the shared nature of responsibility for the group product (e.g. 'no one can proceed to some new project/material before every other group member has completed the previous assignment').

(adapted from Olsen and Kagan 1992)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Building required skills. In order to function efficiently in a groupwork setting, students need to know how to carry out language functions in the following five areas:

- asking for other people's opinion, help and clarification;
- helping and encouraging each other, and showing others how to do things;
- negotiating ideas and giving reasons and explanations;
- giving constructive feedback and managing differences of opinion;
- working out compromises and coming to a consensus or joint decision.

Performing the necessary language skills will require some L2 input (e.g. conventionalised expressions and phrases associated with each linguistic function) as well as some controlled practice, for example as part of role-play activities. The good news is that a communicative language teaching syllabus can accommodate such practice seamlessly.

Setting special norms for group behaviour. Group tasks involve a major change in traditional classroom norms, which are usually centred around paying attention to the teacher and following his/her instructions. Cohen and Lotan (2014) explain that the norm of 'equal participation' is the fundamental cooperative rule to internalise, which can be broken down to a set of behavioural requirements such as (adapted from Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998: 264):

- Be responsive to the needs of your group.
- Encourage others, praise helpful actions and good ideas.
- Take turns, pay attention to and respect other people's opinions.
- Consult your teammates before making a decision.
- Do not dominate but make sure everybody participates.

In Action Point 4 we shall discuss further how group norms in general can be established.

Assigning group roles. Groupwork tasks usually benefit from student role allocation as a way of avoiding problems of disengagement, domination and interpersonal conflicts, through ensuring that everybody has something specific to do. Some generic, task-independent roles that have been successfully used in groupwork activities include:

- *facilitator*: keeps the group on task;
- *encourager*: encourages contributions from each member;

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

- *resource person / information-getter*: communicates with the teacher and other groups to receive information, advice, materials and feedback;
- *summariser*: summarises key ideas on paper and highlights disagreements to be resolved;
- *recorder*: writes up the group decision and acts as the group's spokesperson;
- *time-keeper*: makes sure that the group makes appropriate progress in the allotted time period.

These generic roles can then be complemented by roles specific to the tasks (e.g. overzealous police officer, cheeky reporter, complaining passer-by). Similar to the cooperative skills discussed above, in many cases it may not be sufficient simply to assign the roles, as students may also need language input and practice to be able to perform their roles effectively.

Action 4: Structure Using the Three 'R's: Rules, Roles and Routines

Sometimes classroom communities function smoothly without any intervention but more often than not, the quality of group dynamics is enhanced when the teacher intentionally creates some internal 'structure' in the group. Following Cowley (2013), let us consider three key 'R's as the main ingredients of a facilitative learning culture: *rules*, *roles* and *routines*. As we shall see, these structural components mirror some of the elements of effective groupwork discussed above, but this time they are applied at the whole-class level.

Rules. Class rules – also called 'group norms' – exist so that everyone can feel safe in working together and joint learning can be accomplished. Some group norms are explicitly imposed by the school or the teacher, but the majority emerge spontaneously as the group develops in time. It is important to realise that real group norms are inherently *social products* and, therefore, in order for a norm to have an impact, it needs to be explicitly discussed and then accepted by the majority of the members as a necessary condition for the smooth running of the class. To ensure this 'buy-in', we may initiate an explicit brain-storming exercise early on in the group's life to produce a pool of potential class rules, followed by a process of prioritising, negotiating and selecting. Such a discussion of why the group wants a particular rule and how it will make everyone feel is also an important part of developing interpersonal skills, empathy and an ability to reflect on the effect of a person's actions on others.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

GROUP MEMBERS WILL ACCEPT AND FOLLOW A NORM WHEN THEY:

1. Recognise that the norm exists.
2. See that other members accept and follow the norm.
3. See the norm as helping to accomplish the goals to which members are committed.
4. Feel a sense of ownership for the norm (which usually happens when someone was involved in establishing it).
5. See the norm is being enforced immediately after a violation.

(adapted from Johnson and Johnson 2017: 250–251)

Once prepared, the 'officially' recognised group norms may be displayed on a wall chart to serve as a visible reminder of the rules the group has accepted. One final thing about group norms: it is important to emphasise here that the saying popular in educational circles 'Practise what you teach' is very relevant to them. The personal example the teacher sets in adhering to established norms is a prerequisite to maintaining them in the long run.

SAMPLE SET OF CLASS RULES

For the students:

- Be on time for class.
- Do your homework.
- In small group work, help each other stay in the L2.
- If you miss a class, make up for it and ask a classmate what the homework was.

For the teacher:

- Finish on time.
- Homework and tests should be marked within a week.
- Always give advance notice of a test.

For everybody:

- Listen to each other.
- Help each other.
- Accept each other and encourage each other.
- Do not hurt each other or make fun of each other's weaknesses.
- It's good to take appropriate risks in language use.
- It's OK to make mistakes.

(adapted from Dörnyei and Murphey 2003: 37–38)

Roles. The second R is about the learners having certain *roles* in the class. This can help each learner feel involved and will also give them a sense of accountability for their contribution, thereby reducing the risk of 'social loafing' – everybody hates it when some people simply do not pull their weight. We considered in the previous Action Point a list of useful student roles to enhance engagement in groupwork, and the same principle holds for the whole-class level: when students are given a named responsibility

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(i.e. a role), they can feel very satisfied with the part they play in the group process. If we think about it, the group norms discussed above identify a set of behavioural standards that are instrumental for the group to function well, and roles carry the same function further by assigning a set of expected behaviours to the role-holders so that they can fit into the smooth and productive functioning of the group.

What roles shall we set? This will partly depend on our specific aims, but we may recruit the students themselves to draw up a long-list of useful roles and then to choose a role for themselves. At other times we may want students to challenge themselves in new roles that may be out of their comfort zones. Many educators will be familiar with the notion of Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the distance between the things a learner can currently do and those skills they are close to being able to do but for which they may need the guidance and input of someone more capable, be that a teacher or peers. The most effective learning comes when learners work within their ZPD, being stretched but not overstretched, to develop their skills and competences. Learners may need their role explained to them and role cards can be useful in this respect – there is no reason why these should not be made by the students themselves. Some roles may be more social or group management-based, while others may be more academic or task-based; accordingly, Cohen and Lotan (2014) distinguish between 'how' roles and 'what' roles, the former referring to *how* the process of learning should be done (e.g. facilitator, discussion moderator) and the latter to *what* is being learnt (e.g. resource finder, secretary/recorder). The following panel presents a fuller list of example roles that have been recommended in the literature.

EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE LEARNER ROLES

- *Clarifier*
- *Contributor*
- *Coordinator*
- *Energiser*
- *Evaluator*
- *Fact-checker*
- *Harmoniser*
- *Information/Opinion seeker/provider*
- *Initiator*
- *Resource manager*
- *Secretary/Recorder*
- *Summariser*
- *Time-keeper*

(adapted from Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003)

Routines. The final R refers to the value of routines for groups. Later, when focusing on task design, we will stress the value of variation for

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

engagement (see Chapter 6), and so it may sound counter-intuitive to now highlight the value of recurring routines, yet in terms of group dynamics, they can be invaluable. Just like norms, rules and roles, routines also concern desirable behaviours, but this time these are not described in terms of general expectations in line with the ethos of the class (i.e. a group norm) or with a certain class job (i.e. a role), but rather as concrete acts to perform at a specific stage of the lesson. In a recently observed class of young teenagers in a secondary school in Austria, the teacher walked in and all the students were already behind their desks with pieces of paper in their hands. It transpired that every Friday they start the last lesson of the week with a fun, quick-fire game, and they were enthralled, excited and ready to go even before the teacher entered the room. It was a form of shared knowledge and pattern of action that was part of their classroom culture.

Interestingly, having a routine also means that you can sometimes break it for extra-special effect by *not* doing what students expect and thereby creating surprise and novelty. In addition, routines are also useful classroom management techniques to help everyday things run more smoothly. They can offer a default scenario for dealing with the person who comes to class late or for a learner to ask to be excused for the bathroom. Establishing routines often requires an investment of time and patience, but their benefits for creating engaging learning conditions are manifold.

REFLECTION TASK 8

What rules and routines govern your classes? Have any of these behaviours simply emerged from your preferences over time? Would any of these benefit from being explained more explicitly or the rationale clarified? How consistent are you in enforcing classroom norms? How much input have learners had in them?

Action 5: Foster Democratic Participation

Johnson and Johnson (2017) explain that the field of group dynamics originated from concerns about democracy after World War II, and was seen as a scientific method to strengthen democracy, solve social problems, protect against the reappearance of fascism and reduce racism. It was hoped that training people in cooperative group skills would promote the effective functioning of democratic social systems. Cohen and Lotan (2014) report empirical studies that suggest that this hope is not completely unfounded. In one investigation, for example, when a mixture of young people were given a collaborative task, those who came from classes using cooperative groupwork displayed far more helpful and collaborative behaviour than those coming from classrooms where only whole-class instruction was in use.

Another study by Gillies (2002) showed that training in small-group and interpersonal behaviours can have lasting effects: in her study, even two years after their initial cooperative training, children proved to be better at collaborating and helping each other than their untrained counterparts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These and other similar investigations evidence that a democratic teaching style that allows learners to make decisions and to discuss, plan and carry out tasks on their own can have beneficial socialising effects and can teach students skills that are critical for adult life in a democracy. Bearing these high stakes in mind, let us examine briefly how such democratic participation can be fostered in language classrooms.

> *Lewin and others saw group dynamics theory as one way to bridge the gaps among science (i.e. theory and research), public policies, the solution of social problems, and democratic practices. Inherent in the theory and research on group dynamics is a mandate to improve the effectiveness of democracies …*
>
> (Johnson and Johnson 2017: 479)

In their summary of group dynamics in education, Schmuck and Schmuck (2001) conclude that leadership behaviours that involve stimulating and encouraging student interaction, organising groupwork regularly, initiating discussions about how the class is going and facilitating greater student choice will result in more mature groups. It is important to note, however, that the increase of democratic participation in the classroom can only be gradual – one may rightly argue that at the beginning of a group's life a teacher cannot be as 'democratic' and 'facilitative' as with a fully matured, cohesive group. In agreement with such concerns, Heron (1999) set up a fairly straightforward system concerning optimal facilitation. According to this system, at the outset of group development, the facilitator exercises all the power and makes all the major decisions *on behalf of* the group, in order to offer a clear framework within which early development of cooperation and autonomy can safely occur. Once participants start acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to manage themselves, more power and responsibilities can be shared with the group in governing the learning process; the facilitator can negotiate the curriculum with the students and cooperatively guide their learning activities. Finally, when the group has reached maturity, students are ready for even more power to be delegated to them so as to achieve full self-direction in their learning, that is, to find their *own* way and exercise their *own* judgement. The task of the facilitator at this stage is to create the conditions within which students' self-determination can safely flourish.

Thus, the essence of fostering democratic participation in the classroom is to correctly gauge the optimal speed and manner of relinquishing direct leadership over the group. All this boils down to *delegating authority*, that is, passing on to the students part of the responsibility for getting the work done efficiently and effectively. This is not abdicating responsibility – after all, you will still hold the students accountable – but rather taking a more background role and enhancing self-leadership within the group. We would like to reiterate that delegating authority is not an abstract,

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theoretical exercise but a very hands-on, step-by-step process: it involves specific teacher action to create opportunities – preferably during every single lesson – for learners to go beyond merely following task instructions, by giving them a say first about how to perform certain aspects of the task and then also about what tasks to perform. That is, delegating authority involves, in effect, engaging learners in a qualitatively new mode.

> *When the teacher gives students a group task and allows them to struggle on their own and make mistakes, she has delegated authority.*
>
> (Cohen and Lotan 2014: 2)

REFLECTION TASK 9

How active are your learners in decision-making or influencing their own rights, responsibilities and conditions of learning? What structures, committees or voting bodies exist in your setting as part of school or classroom policy, and how are learners involved? What could you do within your class to foster more democratic participation on the part of the learners?

Summary

In this chapter, we have explored the role of group dynamics in engaging learners, with a special focus on peer relationships and classroom culture. We have argued that these represent the foundations from which learner engagement can flourish. The teacher's primary leadership role in this respect involves creating a safe environment for the learner group to develop and gradually become a mature, productive unit, characterised by cohesiveness and collaboration. The specific actions we can take to facilitate the positive group groundwork for engagement include:

- mixing up learners so that everyone in class knows everyone else personally, thereby strengthening bonds across the group and ensuring that everyone is integrated;
- developing a sense of 'we' and 'us' in the class, to help students forge a group identity and a sense of cohesion as a community;
- preparing learners for groupwork through building relevant interpersonal, collaborative and linguistic skills, through setting cooperative norms and through assigning appropriate group roles;
- structuring classroom life around the 3 'R's – Rules, Roles and Routines – to help things run smoothly and get everyone involved and accountable;
- fostering democratic participation by creating channels for consulting learners and ways of integrating their voices in various aspects of decision-making.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *As a focus on relationships has been the fastest growing area of engagement research in the past 15 years, we have gone quickly from the realization that 'relationships matter' to understanding that few things may matter more.*
>
> (Shernoff 2013: 152)

CHAPTER IN A NUTSHELL

For learners to be willing to engage in class, they need to feel safe and accepted as valued members of a cohesive classroom community, who also have specific responsibilities for their own and the others' learning.

IF YOU WANT TO FIND OUT MORE

Dörnyei, Z. and Murphey, T. (2003). *Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (The core book on group dynamics in language teaching, balancing insights from research with practical advice.)

Kohn, A. (2006). *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD. (A controversial but thought-provoking book that invites us to reflect on our main assumptions as teachers. It includes theory and philosophising as well as some practical ideas.)

Merrell, K. W., and Gueldner, B. A. (2010). *Social and Emotional Learning in the Classroom: Promoting Mental Health and Academic Success*. New York, NY: The Guildford Press. (One of many possible books which explain what SEL – Social and Emotional Learning – is and how it can be integrated into teaching programmes. A good blend of rationale and practical guidance.)

Roffey, S. (2011). *Changing Behaviour in Schools: Promoting Positive Relationships and Wellbeing.* London: SAGE. (An insightful book on promoting prosocial behaviours and positive relationships to maximise engagement and reduce discipline issues. It also briefly addresses the important related issue of teacher well-being.)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009024563.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press