TECHNOLOGY AND INTERACTIVE METHODOLOGIES IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AT PRODEMONS

Niels Dekker¹

How do you get more than 25 school classes a day, of all educational levels, interested in democracy and the Rule of Law? An educational programme that takes three to six hours does not sound very likely, but this is what we do on a daily bases. Our technical interactive methodologies do the trick!

About ProDemos

ProDemos is the ‘House for Democracy and the Rule of Law’, a non-governmental organisation in the Netherlands. Our job is to help explain the systems that govern democracy and the rule of law, and to show what citizens themselves can do to exert political influence – at a municipal, water authorities, provincial, national and European level. ProDemos runs an extensive visitors programme at The Hague and supports teachers with training, educational material, and programmes in schools. In 2018, we received nearly 100.000 students that participated in our educational programme and this is expected to increase every year. The aim is to enable every Dutch secondary school student to the Houses of Parliament combined with a ProDemos programme before their 18th birthday.

ProDemos was established in 2010 as an organisation to promote and support democracy and the rule of law, with adolescents as one of the main target groups. It was a deliberate choice not to limit the focus to democracy, but instead to always include the rule of law, and to emphasize that a democratic system under the rule of law is more than just simple majoritarian decision-making. Equal rights, an inclusive approach towards minority viewpoints, and separation of powers are essential elements of our democratic system.

In 2014, the Leiden University conducted a study (Dekker and Verbeek, 2014) on the effects of the programme, focusing on the effect on political knowledge, as a necessary condition to comprehend the contents

¹ Project manager, trainer and educational developer.
of public debate and for informed political participation. The study found a significant positive impact on the objective referring to participants’ political knowledge.

On-site learning

One of the main elements of the ProDemos approach is that we focus on ‘on-site learning’, involving a direct encounter with the phenomena being studied. Examples are practising democratic skills in or close to our centres of government, parliament, local councils, etc., combining guided tours, meetings with ‘real politicians’, simulation games, and workshops.

The ProDemos Visitor Centre is located directly opposite to the Houses of Parliament (Binnenhof) at The Hague. It is from here that we provide educational programmes for schools, but also guided tours for adults, debates, exhibitions, and courses.

For schools, we organise political excursions and offer guest teacher programmes, role-plays, and teaching materials on current topics related to democracy and the rule of law: useful resources for teachers to make their lessons both concrete and engaging. These outreach programmes reach 50,000 students a year, in primary and secondary school and vocational education. All educational programs are executed by a group of carefully selected and trained educational guides. All of them are employed by ProDemos.

Each group has one guide for the full programme. This means the same guide will be with the class for three to six hours. They carry out the interactive teaching methods and accompany the visit to the Houses of Parliament. The guides are able to deal with a school class, to know everything there is to know about our political and judicial system, and to have the skills to transfer this knowledge to students of all educational levels.
CAR

ProDemos has its own educational department to develop the methods, concepts, and materials used in the on-site programme, as well as the teaching methods for schools. While developing the educators, it always keep the ‘CAR model’ in mind (Stevens, 2004).

CAR stands for COMPETENCE, AUTONOMY, and RELATION. If you want people (not just students) to learn anything, you will have to make sure that you meet these basic needs:

- Students need to feel **competent**. If the level of the method or assignment is too easy or difficult, they will not learn anything, because the focus is on the fact that it is easy or hard to do. That is why we differentiate while developing. Many of our teaching methods are designed at two or more different levels, and the educational guides are able to make it accessible for all levels.

- Students need **autonomy**. This means they can work on their own or together with peers. The teacher or guide should not always be explaining and talking. A good interactive teaching method is designed to make the students find things out for themselves. This asks for clear and simple instructions, and enough time to complete the assignment and time to ask questions. The only moment in our educational programme that students have to ‘sit and listen’ for more than five minutes is while being guided through the Houses of Parliament. Moreover, even there we just explain the basics, and students have plenty of time for questions about what they see.

- The **relation** part of this CAR model is about feeling safe in the group. Not just as a student in relation to the teacher/guide, but also in relation to classmates. When students visit our educational programme, our guide has to make sure that the atmosphere is pedagogically safe. Students should feel that their answers, opinions, and outtakes do matter.

When we take a closer look at the interactive teaching methods in our educational programme for secondary school students, you can see the elements of the CAR model.
The educational programme with interactive methods

A political excursion to The Hague starts – for most students – with getting out of bed earlier than they are used to. However, because the Netherlands is a small and flat country, they can be at The Hague with a bus ride that takes three hours at the most. When they arrive at The Hague, each class gets their own guide for the day. This guide takes the group to one of our big teaching rooms and introduces the subject and the parts of the programme.

Most groups start with an interactive quiz about the Dutch legislative process. Using different props and their own phones, students answer the questions. For the educational guides, this gives the opportunity to find out how much knowledge the students already have and how they behave as a group. The guide will adjust the programme to the needs of the group as much as possible. This way, the guide can make sure that the students feel their competence on the subject throughout the day.

Every group will at least visit the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer). This institution has 150 elected representatives, elected every four years by all 18+ citizens. Together with the Senate (elected by the provincial representatives, who are elected by citizens), they are the highest power in Dutch politics (together: Houses of Parliament). Most students recognize the plenary hall from television or the internet. The guide will explain some of the basics, and students can ask anything they want to know. Most groups also visit the Senate and the Hall of Knights (a historical building in between the Houses of Parliament).

All other activities during the day are complimentary to these visits, and/or shed more light on the functioning of democracy and the rule of law, the goal being to reflect on what the students have seen, or to allow them to experience what it all means. In these activities, there is a lot of autonomy. The guide will explain briefly and then students can get started. Perhaps there might be just some guidance in between.

Every group has at least two of the following interactive methodologies during the programme, in which we make use of tablets and smartphones:
1. Debate simulation game

If you ask the students, the most popular part of the programme (besides visiting the Plenary Hall) is our debate simulation game, in which they act as a mock-Parliament. In this 70-minute game, each student gets a smartphone provided by the ProDemos. Every phone belongs to a different role in the role-play game. On the phone, you can find more information about your role, your political party, what your voters find important and the proposed bill that the debate will be about. Based on this information they will decide how their party will vote on the topic. We have thought of six imaginary parties that have different views on political issues. The guide will introduce the subject and explain how a debate in the House of Representatives takes place. The students will act like members of Parliament for an hour. We use two subjects that students can relate to: a ban on consumer fireworks and raising the legal drinking age to 21 (which is now 18, in the Netherlands).

After discussing and taking their stand on this proposed bill within the parties, they will see if their voters still have confidence in them. We use a special technique to give them ‘live’ feedback on their decisions. Will this affect their stand on the proposed bill?

After the preparations, the six parties have a debate on the subject and will vote on the bill. The guide can send prepared texts to the students individually within the system. Therefore, if you are not participating, you might get a text on your phone that says: “I’ve voted for your party, but I don’t hear you in the debate.”

2. ‘Binnenhof Check’ (tablet game on Inner Court)

Not all activities on the programme are inside our building. The ‘Binnenhof’ (Inner Court) is a small square surrounded by the Houses of Parliament. It is the oldest part of The Hague. There are many interesting things to learn and see here for students, but we do not want a guide to tell them: they need to discover it for themselves.

In pairs, they all get a tablet to play a game. The tablet shows a map of the Inner Court and a blue dot that tells them where they are. They get 30 minutes to answer as many questions as possible. You can only answer a question about a specific spot when the tablets detects that you are physically there, so you have to go there and look around. At the start, they only see one first question, which is different for every pair, so the groups are separated from the starting point. After answering this first question, they see all other questions appear.
The pair that gets more points wins. At every question location, they can choose an easy (one point) or a hard question (two points). There are also bonus questions, that only become visible on the map when you are somewhere near them.

After explaining how the tablet and the game work, the guide gives the group full autonomy. They are on their own, and only have to get back to the guide when the time runs out or if something is not working with the tablet. For students this is the perfect opportunity to ‘blow off some steam’ while still doing something meaningful.

3. DemocracyLAB

The DemocracyLAB is a permanent exhibition of 42 installations that are used by students to discover more about themselves and democracy. How democratic are they? Would they rather live in a dictatorship? What is the reach of freedom of speech for them? Where do their opinions come from, from parents or peers? Are they more on the right or on the left side of the political spectrum?

They get a tablet to answer questions that are posed on the installations. The installations are made to look like a laboratory. Most of the time, they get a physical task on the installation, like flipping a switch, pushing buttons, or completing a puzzle. They can use the outcome to answer the question on their device. Students walk around in pairs, but have to answer for themselves. The can discuss the outcomes with each other along the way.

There are five different routes through the DemocracyLAB, which all fit another level of education. The guide can decide what route the students are assigned, based on their formal school level and his/her own experience with the group during the rest of the programme. When all students get started, the guide is free to walk around and answer some questions or start a discussion to get them going. The activity takes between 15 and 45 minutes, and can be terminated at any time. When students have answered their last question, the system tells them to go back to the desk, where they get a printed certificate with a summary of their answers. Some teachers use this in the classroom to discuss, after the visit.

4. Democracy Experience

The Democracy Experience is an activity in which students are faced with a crisis. A dangerous bird flu virus has entered the country; the government has to act, taking into account the interests of different citizens. In the game, participants are invited to look at the issue from different angles: from the position of farmers, or parents...
of young and vulnerable children, or through the eyes of young and healthy people. The group is randomly divided into these three groups. In the first round of the game, the groups have to collect arguments in the discussion. Which arguments are relevant from their perspective? What arguments are the most important? The groups enter a room in which twenty people (presented as puppets with real faces on screens) are putting forward their argument in the discussion. Each group has to select a maximum of eight arguments and put them in order of priority.

There are four types of arguments: arguments only supporting your own interest, arguments supporting your own interest and the interest of one other group, arguments that everyone can agree with, and arguments that are contrary to your own interest. The choices made by the groups determine how the game continues. In the second round, they get feedback: which group has only focused on its own interest without taking into account the others? Which group chose a more balanced approach? In this phase of the game, it also becomes clear that not only does the decision of the majority determine what will happen next, but also that there is legal protection of individual rights. When, for example, the decision made is that at potentially infected farms all the chickens should be destroyed, farmers can claim financial compensation from the government.

In the last phase of the game, six months have passed and we look back on the crisis, explaining the responsibilities of parliament and government in this process. At the end of the game, students are invited to reflect by indicating which form of democracy they prefer, after getting a short introduction on the definition of these types of democracy: direct democracy, deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, or a stealth democracy.

The game also enables us to analyse the relations between the types of arguments participants have chosen and their preference for a type of democracy. The evaluation of the game also focuses on this. Students sometimes see or feel tensions between their preferred type of democracy and the way government should act in times of crisis. Is time pressure a threat to deliberation? Can a majority take a decision that has a very negative impact on a specific group? Those are the issues to reflect upon.

Potential (and challenges) of using technology and interactive methodologies for citizenship education

At ProDemos, we see a huge potential in working with technology and interactive teaching methods. That is why we removed all the whiteboards from the classrooms in 2013. We do not want our guides to give students
a lecture on democracy and the rule of law – we want students to experience something they cannot experience at school. In addition, whether technology is involved or not, in every teaching method and activity we try to make sure that it is interactive. Using the CAR model helps us to ensure it is.

Now, in 2019, we are in full swing and have a complete interactive programme. At the education department, we are used to asking ourselves: “And what will the students actually do?” Or “How can we do this without the guide telling them?” Using screens, tablets, and smartphones, we give them the same information the guide would otherwise have given them. However, they feel more competent and have more autonomy when they can read it at their own pace, or understand it because of the way it is designed. On the interactive part, there are only upsides and it is highly recommendable.

When you talk about the challenges of using technology and interactive methodologies for citizenship education, the big challenge is the technical part. Because technical devices often break down or have to be adjusted when something changes.

An example is the Democracy Experience: there were so many technical issues with the installation that we had to postpone its inclusion in our daily schedule for over a year. We had long finished the production of the films that tell students what to do, but it turned out that we had to change them all and use the same footage. Doors that had to open automatically at some point kept opening at the wrong times. Alternatively, a door would just open randomly. When we wanted to adjust one word on the screens, we needed two of the contractors to come by... Another big issue is the hardware not working at the Inner Court tablet game. Batteries that refused to charge fully overnight, tablets that did not make a Wi-Fi connection when they should, GPS signals that were lost in bad weather, and software updates that did not work out as they were supposed to. When a guide says or does something wrong, they can correct their error in seconds. However, when the technique fails, the installation can be out of use for a long period, because there is only a limited amount of people who can fix it.

Of course, this is no reason not to use technical methodologies. There are more benefits than disadvantages. In addition, having a couple of good ICT people really helps to do quick fixes.

Current developments

At ProDemos, we do not stop here. We are now in the process of developing an installation that will have a bigger influence on our programme than any of them had before. This has to do with the upcoming renovation of the Binnenhof (Inner Court) and the Houses of Parliament, that will take 5.5 years. During this time, we cannot use the game on the Inner Court. In addition, the temporary locations of the Parliament are farther away and will take longer to reach on foot.

We have taken this opportunity to connect all of our loose interactive activities in a new ‘common thread’. Students will get a tablet to keep with them all day, in a group of three. In between the separate activities, they get short games to play, and questions to reflect on, so they can process the things they have learned. They will start by deciding on a proposed bill. Next, they visit the institutions where part of the legislative process around this bill takes place. The walk to the temporary location will pass historical locations at The Hague and institutions that ensure our rights in the constitution. They can use the tablet to follow a question trail about
articles in the constitution and find out what it means for them. This will replace the game on the Inner Court as the new outside activity.

Moreover, we will build a second debate simulation room to serve more groups, as the number of students is increasing. And, yes, we have learnt and will learn from the mistakes we have made before. However, does that mean there are no more (technical) challenges ahead? We strongly believe that there is no progress without struggle, so we have our work cut out for us.

**If you cannot beat technology, join it!**

In some ways, technology has made teaching more difficult. Just by touching a few buttons on a smartphone, the whole world is in reach. An irresistible temptation, for both adults and students. In the classroom, this means you have to work hard to trigger the interest of (young) people to get them engaged. You will need to provide them with a clear ‘what’s in it for me’-factor. It is not about what they can learn, because they can Google anything. It is about ‘do they want to learn’, and how. Therefore, the activity you want them to carry out needs to be interesting enough for them to look up from their own screen.

In citizenship education, you want students to take on a critical attitude, to be aware of the existence of fake news and how they work, to use arguments in a discussion, and to be able to form their own opinion on certain issues. Of course, you need to facilitate them with some knowledge and skills to do so, but standing in front of a classroom or having them read a book will not teach them these. Use interactive teaching methods and activities that let them experience how things work. This is where technical and interactive methodologies have a big potential. As long as they serve a clear purpose and added value, like making your activities ‘CAR’.

In short, my personal message to you all would be: if you cannot beat technology, join it! Make use of screens, smartphones, and tablets to get your message across. It is the perfect way to get your target group interested, engaged, and into action.

**Índice**