Chapter 5

Drama icebreaker

House of Commons

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Learning outcomes and related terms

The drama processes in this chapter aim to:

- Initiate thinking about a sustainability related-topic such as future energy practices.
- Explore (without preparation) how to view an issue from different perspectives by taking a true or pretend position towards a certain statement (proposition).
- Practice how to instantly formulate arguments and speak up defending a certain position in a playful manner.
- Use body language and position to 'take a stance' and make a non-verbal statement.

Key terms and definitions:

- Word shower: joint associative generation of words similar to brainstorming
- Debate: using verbal arguments in a debate or taking a position in space to discuss or show your agreement or disagreement with a certain viewpoint
- House of Commons: a process where two sides represent two different groups holding different opinions. In a space, these groups sit opposite each other.

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Key sustainability-related outcomes
Embodying sustainability values
Supporting fairness
Embracing complexity in sustainability
Systems thinking
Critical thinking
Envisioning sustainable futures
Futures literacy/anticipatory competence
Exploratory thinking
Acting for sustainability
Individual initiative

Context of application

In 2023 and 2024, a group of 20 PhD candidates participated in a word shower followed by the role play 'House of Commons'. The topic was future household energy practices. The House of Commons role play is a brief and quickly shifting form of role play that takes about 30 minutes to do and can include a reflecting discussion afterwards of 20 minutes. Together with a word shower, which can be created in 10 minutes, it takes in total 60 minutes.

This role play was part of the PhD course Transformative and Participatory Qualitative Research Approaches & Methods (TPAR) of the Wageningen School of Social Sciences (WASS) Graduate Programme in The Netherlands. TPAR provides PhD candidates and early-career scholars conceptual and hands-on methodological engagement with transformative, participatory and action-research approaches that use creative and arts-based research methods and techniques.

These techniques foster the inclusion and engagement of diverse, often marginalised perspectives and to bring into focus, examine and transform narratives, representations, and practices. The course gives students the opportunity to practice using these methods with individuals and groups, as well as to examine and assess these methods in relation to action-oriented engagement and the opportunities and challenges they pose for data analysis and (re)presentation (Ormond & De Vrieze, 2024). PhD candidates participating in this course come from different scientific backgrounds such as health, sustainability, international development studies, and governance.

Step-by-step guidance

Word shower:

1. Write the topic (e.g. 'future energy practices') on a board or flipchart.
2. Ask the students to pay attention to what comes up in their mind when they hear the words 'future energy practices'. A possibility, when a group is a bit

shy or if certain students tend to be more outspoken than others, is to ask students to first discuss their ideas with another student. However, then it becomes less improvised and associative and more well-considered – like a normal brainstorm.

3. Ask the students to raise their hands and share their words with the facilitator who writes these words in a circle around the central topic.
4. Let the students build upon each other's words. Actively ask for new input.
5. Check with the group whether the word shower is complete by asking 'Did we miss any words?'
6. The outcome is a joint mind map with many different words. Summarise what is shown on the mind map.

House of Commons:

1. Prepare a number of 'propositions' that are debatable. Here are some examples related to future household energy practices:

   ■ The strongest shoulders should bear the heaviest burden.
   ■ For everyone, an electric car in front of your house.
   ■ The rich are showing much better energy practices than the poor: look who has solar panels and heat pumps.
   ■ The technology push represses space for non-technological solutions.
   ■ Cooking a good and tasteful meal for friends and family is more important than saving energy.
   ■ The speed of the required energy transition is more important than that everyone can keep up with that speed (we have to act now).
   ■ The municipality should enforce the energy saving practices.

2. Put an equal number of chairs at each side of the room and place them opposite to each other. The number of chairs depends on the group size. If there are, for example, 16 students, you can put 8 on each side.
3. Appoint a facilitator to manage the process. It can be either the teacher or one of the students.
4. Explain to the group that one side represents proponents, who agree to the proposal, and the other side are opponents, who disagree. The students can pretend to agree or disagree, it does not need to be their real opinion.
5. The facilitator presents the first proposition, e.g. on a PowerPoint slide or a flipchart. Show one proposition at a time.
6. Ask the students to stand up, choose a side and sit down.
7. Brief the participants to stand up when they want to explain why they agree or disagree with a proposition or if they want to react to someone speaking.
8. Summarise viewpoints and invite more participants to react.
9. The facilitator presents a new proposition, and the procedure is repeated.
10. The students may well change sides if they hear a certain viewpoint, or choose to stand in the middle. That is fine too and often results in some laughter.

Framing or pre-work

The word shower serves to introduce the topic of the House of Commons role play. It is also possible to ask the students to prepare by reading about the topic, in this case future energy practices, before the session, or to connect to relevant literature afterwards.

When to use and when not to use

The word shower allows teachers to quickly see what the students know about a certain topic. If making a word shower is used as an icebreaker, the teacher could go back to the mind map after the drama activity and see if certain words need to be added or removed from the word shower.

The House of Commons role play is useful to create a safe place and have some fun together. The students can play and pretend they hold a certain viewpoint and develop arguments to defend a specific position. The tool is inclusive as anyone who is less outspoken can join non-verbally or by literally taking a stance, a physical position in the room (agree or disagree).

The tool is not appropriate for large groups (more than 20 participants) or for very sensitive topics. It is also important that the propositions are debatable, that is, the proposition can be seen as being either true or false. If propositions are unclear participants often start to discuss how the proposition is formulated. If everyone agrees or disagrees with a proposition – or in other words if there is nothing to debate – the tool is (also) not effective. Either there are no disagreements on the topic in a particular group, or the propositions need to be a bit more 'edgy'. Then you can just move on to the next proposition, or the facilitator can invite some persons to defend the opposite of what everyone agrees or disagrees with.

Reflections from the field

In the applications so far, all students were actively engaged. The word shower was created in 10 minutes. Examples of words mentioned included solar panel, electric car, renewable energy, sustainability, energy poverty, climate change, sustainable transport, saving water, recycle, and consumption of local products. For the House of Commons, after one or two participants started to defend their position, others also got involved and there was a lot of energy, playfulness, and laughing. Some participants were clearly more involved than others and also dared to speak up and defend their position. Reflections after the session included:

> "Warming up with the word shower icebreaker and then the House of Commons worked really well to get everyone ready to play."

> "We are getting to know each other in a different way through these playful methods."

"Easier for extroverts and can be intimidating for those who have never done something like this."

Things to consider

Manage people who are very outspoken and tend to easily take the floor. Actively invite others to voice their opinion. Repeat during the session that the students can pretend that they have a certain (often unexpected or socially less accepted) viewpoint.

Learning extensions

Word shower:

■ The students can be asked to write words on sticky notes, and these notes can be collected and organised into sub-themes.
■ There are also many word-cloud generators available as software applications (e.g. Mentimeter). They can provide an overview of those words that appear with the highest frequency.

House of Commons:

■ Discuss some debating techniques before you play the actual House of Commons.
■ Ask the students to prepare the propositions themselves.
■ Ask volunteers to take the facilitator role.
■ Collect arguments on a flipchart and discuss them afterwards.

Integrating with assessment

As the core idea of these activities is to practice argumentation in a creative and associative manner, assessment is not really suitable and can even be counterproductive. If for some reason assessment is mandatory, possible criteria for assessment could be:

■ Quality of the words in the word shower.
■ Level of participation in the debate.
■ Quality of the argumentation.

Further reading

Brown, Z. (2015). The use of in-class debates as a teaching strategy in increasing students' critical thinking and collaborative learning skills in higher education. *Educational Futures*, *7*. https://wlv.openrepository.com/handle/2436/621883

McMonagle, R. J., & Savitz, R. (2022). Active learning: Beyond structured debates in political science pedagogy. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2022.2132164

Reference

Ormond, M. E., & De Vrieze, A. G. M. (2024). Transformative and participatory qualitative research approaches and methods. *Course Guide 2024*. Wageningen School of Social Sciences. https://www.wur.nl/en/show/transformative-and-participatory-qualitative-research-approaches-and-methods-4-ects.htm