

Facilitating Research Activities in the Classroom

Facilitando actividades de investigación en el aula

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ABSTRACT:

The paper reveals the rationale for using facilitating technologies in organizing and carrying out regional research into school education. The use of group discussion methods allows researchers to effectively deal with the current challenges and devise a plan to address them, to maintain personal development, to strengthen self-confidence and make the group more successful and productive. Learners working in such groups develop self-confidence in their research capabilities, gain useful knowledge and skills and enhance mutual awareness. The paper puts forward a theory of and methods for facilitated session organization and various useful techniques for learners to implement their research projects. Special attention is given to the trade show, which provides learners with a user-friendly format for making group presentations. The suggested patterns correspond to facilitation techniques and do not run counter to the requirements of Russia's Federal State Education Standards.

Keywords: facilitation, facilitating teacher, regional studies, research, organization of teachers' facilitation activities, facilitated session, facilitation activity coordination

RESUMEN:

Facilitación de actividades de investigación en el aula. El documento revela los motivos para utilizar tecnologías facilitadoras en la organización y realización de investigaciones regionales sobre educación escolar. El uso de métodos de discusión grupal les permite a los investigadores enfrentar efectivamente los desafíos actuales y diseñar un plan para enfrentarlos, mantener el desarrollo personal, fortalecer la confianza en sí mismos y hacer que el grupo sea más exitoso y productivo. Los estudiantes que trabajan en estos grupos desarrollan confianza en sí mismos en sus capacidades de investigación, obtienen conocimientos y habilidades útiles y aumentan la conciencia mutua. El documento presenta una teoría y métodos para la organización de sesiones facilitadas y varias técnicas útiles para que los estudiantes implementen sus proyectos de investigación. Se presta especial atención a la feria comercial, que proporciona a los alumnos un formato fácil de usar para realizar presentaciones en grupo. Los patrones sugeridos corresponden a las técnicas de facilitación y no van en contra de los requisitos de los Estándares de Educación del Estado Federal de Rusia.

Palabras clave: facilitación, profesor facilitador, estudios regionales, investigación, organización de actividades de facilitación de docentes, sesión facilitada, coordinación de actividades de facilitación

1. Introduction

Regional studies are part of the regional component of modern curricula and play significant educational and instructional role in modern schools. Regional studies are taught through projects, museum programs and art technologies, among others. This paper will focus on facilitation activities. "What we mean by 'facilitation' (from English 'facility') is fostering dominant reactions and actions in the presence of other people such as observers and partners" (Pedagogical Facilitation). Educational facilitation refers to "improved educational productivity (training, instruction) and the development of subjects of the educational process by means of their particular communication style and of their teacher's personality" (Grakhova and Nasonova 2017).

Modern information society and new educational technologies as well as personality-oriented teaching models have led to the implementation of facilitation techniques in the classroom (from English 'to facilitate', foster, promote, create favorable conditions) (Dimukhametov 2006)). E. Gusinskyy (Gusinsky 1994), I. Demakova (Demakova 2002), I. Zhizhina and E. Zeyer (Zhizhina and Zeyer 1999), R. Ovcharova (Ovcharova 2017), E. Nikitin (Nikitin and Sitnik 2004), K. Rogers (Rodzhers 1967) and V. Slastenin (Slastenin 2000) are among those who recognize the effectiveness of using facilitation in research management.

The article is centered round the use of facilitation in school-based regional studies.

2. Methods

The authors adopted modern theoretical research methods, including modern methods for facilitating group work and organizing learning activities in general education schools, an interdisciplinary analysis of didactic, methodological, psychological and facilitation technologies, in addition to empirical methods such as the methodological description, the statistical processing of the results and the hermeneutic methods of interpreting them.

Regional studies in schools refer to a comprehensive scientific research of a specific region and focus on this or that region's natural resources, history, population, lifestyles, cultures, art and more. What is special about school-based regional studies is that learners conduct research activities under the guidance of a teacher. While taking into consideration the curriculum requirements, the composition of classes or of specially formed groups, the teacher determines research subjects, identifies types and methods of work, organizes and monitors the learners' work. Consequently, successful result of regional studies depends entirely on the organization skills and subject-matter knowledge of the teacher.

3. Results and Discussion

This study suggests the methodology to organize facilitation-based regional studies. Facilitation is needed at the beginning of and during the project implementation and when coordinating research, planning and monitoring interactions among learners and making presentations or conferences on the outcomes of research, among other things.

When viewed in the context of regional studies, facilitation can be defined as a professional organization of the group/pair work directed at identifying and achieving their objectives by learners.

Facilitation results in highly successful research projects owing to the following three aspects: speed, creativity and effectiveness. Speed is ensured by focusing on key topics, questions and on the productivity of the working process and by stimulating creative activity and contribution of learners to the research process. Creativity is achieved through an interactive working process and the implementation of modern facilitation tools and techniques stimulating the promotion of bright ideas, decisions and implementation plans. Effectiveness results from everyone's participation in a project, from efficient work plans and from learners' understanding that the results of their work belong to them (Dudorova 2014).

At the start of a regional study project, the teacher holds a facilitation session titled, for instance, 'The Regional Study Strategy for the Academic Year'. Below is a tentative plan for such a training session.

Topic: The Regional Study Strategy for the Academic Year

Participants: learners and teachers.

Number of participants: 25 to 30 (as a rule, the number of participants corresponds to that of a class or a regional studies' club).

Number of facilitating teachers: 1 or 2.

Length: 2 lessons (90 minutes).

Location: class (regional museum or school/city library).

Objectives:

1. To review the upcoming activity.
2. To introduce the upcoming activity to the learners.
3. To specify and agree upon the key objectives of the topic-related activity for the upcoming year and the best ways to achieve them.
4. To engage all research members into the discussion and development of the main objectives of the study and ways to achieve them.

Recommended facilitation steps to be taken at the facilitation session:

The facilitating teacher's presentation of the upcoming regional study activity.

A SWOT analysis to be carried out in groups (strengths and weaknesses, what we know, what we can, what we shall learn and master, etc.)

Goal-setting.

Strategies for achieving objectives (what we do not know, our intended results, steps and activities; effectiveness matrix).

4. Results

An analysis has been made of the upcoming research activities; learners' strengths and witnesses have been identified, along with eventual difficulties in conducting research and in achieving project objectives. The data obtained have been considered in formulating the objectives of the research projects to be carried out by learners, resulting in a list of objectives for the entire academic year, and the general and individual plans of implementation have been developed. All of the participants in the educational session were engaged in the discussion, contributed to the decisions and actively communicated with each other. At the end of the session, the participants have had clear understanding of the upcoming work, of its objectives and possible outcomes.

To be clear, a SWOT analysis is a technique used to provide an initial assessment of a project (in this case, an educational project). SWOT is the written abbreviation of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. A SWOT matrix is square-shaped (See Fig. 1).

During the training session, learners realize that strengths and weaknesses represent their inner environment, their current knowledge and skills. Opportunities and threats are representative of the outer environment, in other words, new things that learners can learn (opportunities) and challenges they can face (threats) during their research activity.

Fig. 1
A SWOT matrix

SWOT matrix		
	+ pros	– cons
Interior	Strengths	Weaknesses
Exterior	Opportunities	Threats

Following the first facilitation session, learners specify their project topics, objectives and implementation plans. Then, the facilitating teacher coordinates and guides learners in their research project and provides assistance with data processing and presentation. At the initial stage, subgroups are involved in planning research projects.

Work in small groups is recommended to tackle the following tasks:

1. Strengthened motivation to succeed;
2. Deeper understanding of the research topic;
3. Rapid study of selected aspects of the research topic;
4. Greater engagement into research.

Organization of work in small groups includes the following:

1. To describe the objective of the upcoming discussion in one sentence. For example, "We are going to discuss..."
2. To name the subject of discussion and to specify the expected outcomes. For instance, "You have found interesting information on your research topic, '...'. How do you intend to systemize it? What is the rationale behind your presentation of your research findings? Are you planning to provide any illustrations, photographs, graphs, etc.? What will your final result will be? A presentation?"
3. If necessary, to provide additional instruction on how to lead group discussions.
4. To set the deadline for this activity.
5. To hold debates

A debate can be held as an open discussion, presented in detail in another paper, *Facilitating an open discussion in the general secondary school* (Grakhova and Nasonova 2017).

The aim of the facilitating teaching is to keep the group active and engaged. It is possible, however, that not all the learners have grasped the main idea of the upcoming project. To avoid such gaps, the facilitator presents the following steps and then writes them on the board/tablet (Keyner 2017):

1. Objective: "Here's what we intend to do..."
2. Result: "Here's what we shall get at the end of the project..."
3. Process: "Here's how we are going to proceed..."
4. Argumentation: "Here's why we proceed this way..."
5. Deadline: "Here's how much time we'll need..."

Results obtained by a group are presented in the roundtable discussion so that everyone can answer the summarizing question (this question may be one of the following or other,

depending on the context: What did you learn? What issues did you touch upon? What do you think are your chances of succeeding? How do you react to a variety of points of view? etc.). The roundtable discussion ends by identifying the next step in the research process: 'What is next?'

One of the important things about facilitation of the research activity is the preparation of presentations to be made at the final conference. During the preliminary inquiry and observation of the group reports and presentations, the facilitating teacher clears up the following problems encountered during research:

Problem 1: The report is full of logical inconsistencies and hard for others to follow.

Solution: To suggest that the presenter should review the logical sequence of his or her report.

Problem 2: The report abounds in repetitions.

Solution: To suggest that the presenter should jot down the key points of his or her report before the presentation.

Problem 3: Listeners find it hard to grasp the main idea of the report.

Solution: To suggest that the presenter should expose his or her main idea in a few sentences at the beginning of the presentation and then repeat it at the end.

Problem 4: Listeners are passive during the presentation.

Solution: To suggest that the presenter should review the logical sequence of his or her report.

Problem 5: Listeners appear utterly confused about what the presentation is about.

Solution: The facilitator should encourage the presenter to allot some time to questions and answers, help him or her with the organization and conducting the questions' and answers' session.

Problem 6: Listeners are confused about how to use information when the presentation is over.

Solution: The facilitator should encourage the presenter to make it clear for listeners what challenges are posed to them and what is expected from them after the presentation.

Problem 7: Listeners lose focus due to the report's overabundance with details and superfluous explanations.

Solution: The presenter should be encouraged to use the following:

- straightforward visual aids;
- diagrams and drawings;
- flip charts...

Problem 8: During the presentation, the presenter gives out handouts, thus distracting listeners from the presentation or the following discussion.

Solution: The facilitator should encourage the presenter to pause during his or her presentation or propose the presenter to finish the presentation and then distribute handouts.

The final session takes place at the end of the research activity in the area of regional studies. A trade show is the best way of organizing it (Keyner 2017).

The authors deem productive training activities organized through an exercise of collective reflection, "as part of discussions and joint search research, when learners discuss different ways of tackling a problem" (Chipsanova 2007). Training is based on teacher-learner and learner-learner dialogue communication. Gradual "interiorization of these collective actions is taking place, as well as transformation into an individual solution of learning challenges" (Schuman 2006). Such activities result in increased quality of education provided to schoolchildren by means of group work.

A trade show is a convenient mode of presenting information in groups of at least three. Each presentation last 5 to 7 minutes.

In the traditional classroom, several presenters make their presentations to the class one after another. A trade show implies simultaneous presentations to subgroups.

Participants are introduced to the presentation, ask questions, take notes or do an assignment given to them before the presentation. Then, everyone moves on to another 'station' with another presenter. Presenters repeat their speech to this new subgroup.

This activity organization structure has several advantages:

- each participant in a small group is engaged in the research activity, which results in a more in-depth discussion;
- moving from one 'station' to another keeps learners active and diminishes the sense of tiredness from the abundance of presentations.

Based on the above, what follows is a tentative trade show plan to be carried out in the classroom.

1. To determine in advance places where presenters can create their own 'presentation stations'. Each presenter must have his or her own 'station'.
2. At the appointed time, presenters will take up their positions and groups will start moving from one position to another. Each subgroup should preferably have an equal number of participants.
3. To discuss in advance with presenters the time allotted to the presentation and to the follow-up questions and answers.
4. When the time is over, to ask everyone to leave their 'station' and move on to the next one (moves should be determined in advance, for instance, clockwise).
5. To ask presenters to repeat their presentation to a new audience.
6. To repeat the steps outlined, as necessary, so that all the learners could familiarize themselves with all the presentations.
7. To bring the entire class together for general discussion.

A trade show is a facilitation technique and a way of organizing self-regulated communication in which every participant/learner has the following:

- control over the communication process;
- possibility to influence the discussion and to make him- or herself heard;
- full authorship of the results obtained.

5. Conclusion

The above-mentioned organization of communication is called 'moderated'. As he works with a class or a group, the facilitating teacher does not seek leadership in discussions, but rather impartiality, perception and transmission of the group's ideas and emotions.

As a facilitator, the teacher does not record the participants' main ideas, but rather suggests the learners to keep individual records of opinions and to visually present them on big supports specially designed for this purpose. Decisions are taken and emotions are made known by sticking color labels next to the recorded opinions.

Consequently, at the end of the activity, each learner sees the results achieved and feels that time that has been devoted to it hasn't been in vain.

In summary, the following is the key to the success of research activities and of activities based on facilitation technologies: students' motivation in achieving results; emotional experience conducive to learning; presentation of material aimed at plural perception; generation of 'memory knots' or recording the key points made during class, during the review and use of the studied material in future work.

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