

*'It is generally argued that one way of effective Social Studies lessons aimed to develop critically minded citizens for a knowledge-based economy is to motivate students to construct their own learning into a meaningful enjoyable experience.'*

Discuss this statement with reference to your own teaching practice experience so far.

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## **Introducing Social Studies and its aims within the curriculum and within the classroom**

As stated by the NCSS (National Council for Social Studies), the main aim of Social Studies

‘is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world’

But what can actually be inferred from this statement? Are young pupils truly being prepared to develop ideas which are augmented with valid experiences, explanations and beliefs? To delve deeper within this perspective one could ask whether students are provided with adequate encouragement to form personal opinions about the subject in question rather than being, and misguidedly aided to become indoctrinated citizens, who have to comply with, abide to and repeat what they are told by significant others and teachers at school. Social Studies could be considered as a subject that lends itself to practical measures. This is possible because it has the purpose of building within students, the ability to become objectively informed individuals who are thus prepared to attach their own meaning to what is happening around them.

Unfortunately students are seen to lack this type of potential but this could be due to having insufficient possibility to express and exercise critical thinking. To further add upon this issue, students are rewarded when they ascribe to an already available set of prespecified norms and anyone who challenges the system is labelled as deviant. By adopting such an approach, the educational system does not offer any room for pupils to actually construct their own learning. They are praised if they produce the precisely same material that they had been previously given. This could be viewed as a memory task where the material is easily forgotten as soon as examinations and assessments have been conducted. This consequently leads to the question of what type of learning did actually occur and whether learning is being embedded appropriately. It could be considered as a type of provisional learning which serves the purpose of obtaining high marks, but which does not portray significant outcomes in regard to the concept of learning for life. Hence,

learning is not applicable to real life situations and its non-usage leads to the extinction of particular concepts which are supposedly intended to be 'learnt'.

One of the targets of Social Studies as a taught subject is to foster among students civic competences with which they become critical towards the social environment (Said, 2004). As a result students should also develop an interest and actively engage within their respective communities (ibid.). Thus they become holistically participative in the economic, cultural and political dimensions of the nation and eventually realise that their contribution is of utmost importance. If students develop constructive criticism, they would develop the ability to make good and effective decisions which do not only reflect upon their well-being but also on society at large.

### **Theoretical perspective that supports the concept of students' construction of learning**

According to Said (2004), Social Studies has to be challenging for students, it should allow room for reflection and ought to make students become critical thinkers. To do so, learning should take place within a practical dimension which helps students apply what they learn in the world outside the school. One could also assert that the National Minimum Curriculum (1999) advocates the necessity that education is relevant for pupils' lives. This implies that school has the duty of helping students become eager to learn and use the acquired knowledge. Cassar (2004) also mentioned that Social Studies has to portray a realistic picture of society so that students would obtain a true vision of what is actually happening in the world and in their everyday lives.

This clearly shows that school has a primary goal of stimulating students' intellect and that by doing so, they become proficient in their academic performance. In the NMC (1999), it is explained that education should be of quality and is supposed to reach all types of diversity present within the classroom. Through Social Studies, education becomes of quality when the subject is presented in an interactive rather than a passive manner. Moreover, students who learn differently should be given the facility to show

their respective competences in the way they know best (Singer, 1997) and Social Studies could play an instrumental role in this aspect by helping students develop their unique and different thinking skills. If this takes place, another principle would be fulfilled where analytical, critical and creative skills are refined.

As a main theoretical perspective, one could highlight that constructivism is a key principle that supports students' construction of knowledge within the class. The Educational Broadcasting Corporation (2004) described constructivism as

“basically a theory -- based on observation and scientific study -- about how people learn. It says that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what we believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge. To do this, we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know.”

Doolittle and Hicks (2003) maintain that constructivism is a break away from other traditional methods as students are highly involved in the process of acquiring their own information. Questioning is a key feature in constructivism especially when *why* and *how* questions (ibid.) as well as *what if* questions (Beck, 2003) become central in the build up of the lesson. Consequently Doolittle and Hicks identified four main tenets which are imperative when adopting constructivist pedagogy. These elements call for an active rather than passive approach on the students' behalf; the role of personal and social experiences in shaping every individual's information in a unique way; adapting to environmental conditions which form the basis of pupils' beliefs and values and finally the necessity to have a culture based knowledge which contribute to building social and linguistic interactions. All these characteristics are essential in motivating students to construct their own knowledge. This is due to the emphasis placed on sharing unique experiences (thus making every individual feel important) and eventually building knowledge from all the information gained during the sharing process.

Levine (2005) asserted that constructivism brings to the forefront characteristics such as creativity, child-centred approaches, pluralism, holism and democracy within the learning

setting. Levine mentions that students should be motivated to generate their own learning and that the teacher's role is to create a 'tailor made' classroom context depending on students' likings so as to capture their interest in the subject. A learner-centred approach could help pupils understand the topic because they would be assigned to do tasks, which keep them focused and which automatically would require them to reflect during activities. It is also important to mention that constructivism values holism where the individual's intellect is not separated from the social and emotional spheres of learning (ibid.). Another feature of constructivism is democracy. This notion is highly applicable within Social Studies since students would share responsibility with adults in the classroom (Levine, 2005) and they have to be responsible when expressing their thoughts so as to be respectful and constructive.

According to the NCSS (2008), Social Studies is a powerful subject which should instil students into becoming active citizens who have developed civic interest through seeking knowledge from and understanding the subject per se. Moreover the Council also states that to be powerful, Social Studies should be an integrative subject by means of combining information from related social sciences such as philosophy, anthropology, etc. It should also be value-based, by a process of making students aware of their own values and how these can consequently affect their decision making.

In order to be effective, constructivism requires that teachers do not make 'chalk and talk' lessons (Singer, 1997). It should rather consist of enquiry-based approaches where students make meaning of things they search for while exploring concepts (ibid.). This means that there should be effective interaction between students and teachers and between students and students within the classroom. As a result there should be a collaborative relationship between peers so as to facilitate the process of information sharing. Collaborative learning can bring about more commitment towards the tasks which are assigned, students are more likely to participate and they become more supportive with each other (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1985; Cefai, 2008).

## **The advantages of learner centred approaches as opposed to the perils of using teacher centered methods**

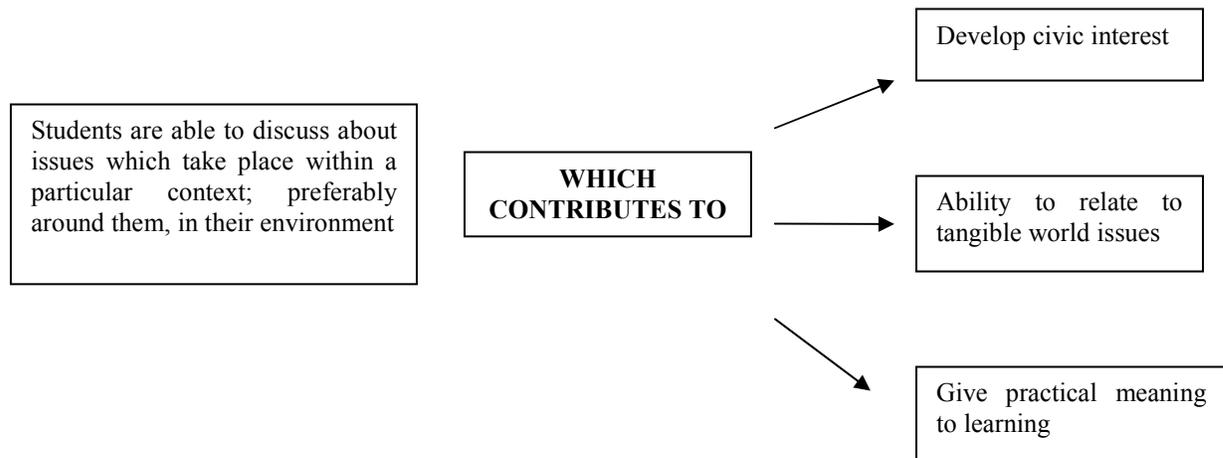
The teacher may have a different mentality and in such a case, would ascribe diverse meanings to notions explained during the lesson. This may also emerge when teachers have a different educational and social background. This means that what makes sense for the teacher may not carry the equivalent value for the child and vice versa. Their values, attitudes and skills may be different and therefore students' learning style differences should be respected and acknowledged as long as the learning goals are achieved. This evokes the necessity that both teacher and students share knowledge and experiences; which in short could be described as learner-centered approach as opposed to a teacher-centred methodology. Both learner and teacher are expected to nourish each other's learning, understand each other and respect each others' points of view. Teachers should refrain from looking down on students and presuming that their knowledge is unquestionably correct. It should rather be an enriching experiential process where new information is acquired and built for both parties involved. The perception that children do not know anything and that they have to be instructed rather than guided, is not a fruitful method to adopt. Among the reapings of a learner centred approach, one would find that pupils do not hold back from asking further questions more about the topic being discussed. They are also able to process information and can analyze and verbalise their thoughts and concerns about the topic at hand.

Moreover using a teacher-centred approach in the classroom does not stimulate students to participate during the lesson. On the contrary they are given the hidden message that the teacher is conducting the lesson and that their role is to listen, and not to question what they are being told. Eliminating all type of discussion and idea formation and inhibiting any form of argumentation skills, might contribute to the death of Social Studies, by rendering it obsolete and depriving it of its roots.

Social Studies should not be introduced solely as a textbook subject. Students ought to be presented with real-life situations, and preferably with aspects which they encounter

outside the school, so that they would be able to visualise the concept more clearly and be able to offer multiple positive and negative perspectives to support their arguments. In my opinion, several factors could be achieved when Social Studies is approached from a learner-centred approach. To explain further, a table has been created to show two possible effects (hereunder referred to as Effect A and B) that could arise when making use of this type of method.

### Effect A



### Effect B

Students are able to formulate the relationship between education and the school's role as well as the relationship between school and world. They ought to link both worlds in a constructive manner.

### Linking theory and practice in Social Studies

Constructivism offers a variety of positive effects to a teacher who makes use of this method. Constructivism can help students gain argumentations skills, thinking skills and the ability to link what happens in the environment with what is discussed at school. Students seem more interested when a discussion takes place during the lesson. Subsequently, when they are requested to carry out tasks in group work, they seem to obtain a vast array of information and seem to have less difficulties in articulating their thoughts and opinions about the topic in question.

Consequently one could realise that collaborative learning can be a very productive method to use in Social Studies. The classroom environment has to accommodate such a method in so far as pupils should ideally be seated in a circle so as to enable them to discuss and construct knowledge. On the other hand, individual learning promotes a competitive environment among students who would consequently be reluctant to share information. If Social Studies is intentioned to help students through constructivism, it is necessary that students feel more willing to work with each in order to construct their own knowledge. In order that students be encouraged to share information, they should be freed of feeling possessive over their personal information as this, of course, automatically does not permit a meaningful and enjoyable experience to emerge out of learning. It rather transmits an environment where everyone is reluctant to work together, and to a certain extent they would rather compete against each other to obtain better examination results.

Students should be encouraged to be creative rather than repetitive. If they are required to come up with the same information that the teacher had previously given, students would not be interested or motivated to learn. From teaching practice experience, one could say that students seemed rather intrigued when they were assigned to do practical things, which were related with real life situations. Constructivist methods were also appropriate to help students become more autonomous in their learning where the teacher's role was to guide the students and not preach chunks of information to them. When using constructivism, students seem to find a link between what each of them is saying, and together they can formulate and arrive at a conclusion about a topic under discussion. Constructivism could also aid them in getting rid of their fear to expose their ideas or opinions. Asking students what is their opinion regarding a subject in question could help them become more eloquent. Also, the teacher's role would be to foster a sense of respect among the pupils who do not hold the same beliefs but who nonetheless have a right to discuss freely about their point of view, as long as it is done with genuinely good intentions. As an example one could mention that politics is highly debatable among students within the classroom. Through Social Studies and the use of critical thinking,

students would learn to express non-judgemental and constructive opinions about political issues. It is generally conceived that students are 'colourblind' by supporting the political party that their family supports without ever questioning or reasoning their choices. The role of Social Studies teachers is to induce students into asking and making rational choices rather than being spoon-fed and influenced by others.

From a practical orientation, it is important to mention that the attached lesson plan, is used as an example of how constructivism could be adopted within the classroom. Although theoretically, constructivism was addressed from a general point of view in this assignment, it is of ultimate importance to mention that several branches have emerged from constructivism. Among which, one could mention the radical, social and cognitive constructivism. For the purpose of the lesson plan and for the purpose of the theoretical knowledge which have been presented, social constructivism will be utilized within the framework of the lesson plan. This is due to the fact that social constructivism as a paradigm, lent itself most to the argument that I wanted to represent. Among the activities which have been used, brainstorming was required so that students would have more time to discuss and process collective rather than individual information. Group work and role play were also utilised to promote discussion and reflection. Finally one could assert that social constructivism was highly beneficial to develop students' argumentation skills and re-enforce their social interaction.

## **Conclusion**

Finally one could mention that Social Studies as a subject should be responsibly presented to students, and its significance should not be underestimated neither by them nor by the teachers. Students should be fostered with practical skills which help them to become active participants in their community and responsible decision-makers who are able to part from pre-conceived or judgmental ideas that do not have any consistent background to support such beliefs.

Students should experience Social Studies as a subject which truly makes a difference in their lives and which gives them something tangible to help them cope and grow within the world. The construction of knowledge can help students become active seekers of information that could help them in forming and developing their ideology. Only through such means as constructivism, can pupils learn to ask questions and think in a critical manner. This consequently can make Social Studies a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience for students who would gain skills that aid them to contribute as future citizens within the community. And to do so, education does not have to target only students' intellectual development but should be holistic in its approach in that students' emotional, social and character formation are addressed.

As an end note, self-explanatory is the quote of Martin Luther King Jr. who asserted that

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education”

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## Appendix

## **Pajjżna: Nies, Komunitajiet, Ambjent**

**Sub-Title:** SOLUZZJONIJIET għall-problemi fl-ambjent fiżiku u dak soċjali

**Data:** 9 ta' Diċembru 2008

**Klassi:** Form 2

**Tul tal-Lezzjoni:** 45 minuta

**Għan tal-Lezzjoni:**

- L-istudenti għandhom ikunu kapaċi jagħrfu tipi ta' problemi li jistgħu jinholqu meta l-bnedmin ma jiddux hsieb l-ambjent soċjali u dak naturali li jgħixu fi
- Iridu juru l-abilita' li joffru soluzzjonijiet dwar it-tipi ta' problemi li niltaqgħu magħhom f'dan l-ambjent
- L-istudenti iridu jeżerċitaw il-kapaċita' li jiddiskutu dwar problemi ambjentali u problemi soċjali

**Organizzazzjoni tal-Lezzjoni:**

<b>Sezzjoni tal-Lezzjoni</b>	<b>Deskrizzjoni</b>	<b>Hin assenjat</b>
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<b>Introduzzjoni</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Jitwaħħlu flashcards u posters dwar nuqqas ta' rispett lejn l-ambjent</li> <li>○ Isir brainstorming dwar dak li qed jaraw fuq il-board</li> <li>○ L-istudenti jridu joħorgu t-tema ewlenija ta' dak li ġie preżentat flimkien (għandhom jaslu għal ftehim / qbildwar dak li ġie preżentat)</li> <li>○ Jitwaħħlu stampi dwar nuqqas ta' tolleranza</li> <li>○ Isir brainstorming dwar dak li qed jaraw fuq il-board</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Social</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Constructivism</i></p> <p>Permezz tal-brainstorming, l-istudenti jingħataw iċ-ċans li jibnu r-realta' ta' dak li qed jaraw fil-posters b' mod kollettiv. Dan il-proċess jiġi iffacilitat permezz tad-djalogu</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5mins</p>
<b>Żvilupp tal-Lezzjoni</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ L-istudenti jiġu maqsuma f'erba' gruppi. Tnejn minnhom (<b>A u B</b>) jingħataw artiklu mill-gazzetta dwar problema ambjentali (eż: tniġġis ta' żejt fil-baħar) u dwar problemi ta' nuqqas ta' tolleranza u rispett fis-soċjeta' (<b>C u D</b>) (eż: pika u fanatiżmu fil-partiti tal-futbol li jġibu firda u vjolenza, gwerer, etc)</li> <li>○ Jingħataw exercise fejn iridu jiddiskutu dawn l-artikli</li> <li>○ Jiktbu punti relatati li jiġu diskussi fil-klassi u flimkien naraw jekk hux kulhadd jaqbel u għaliex? (Jridu joffru raġunijiet validi biex isaħħu l-perspettiva tagħhom)</li> <li>○ <b>Grupp A u B:</b> Jsemmu xi affarijiet li l-bniedem jagħmel biex ma jkunx qed jieħu hsieb l-ambjent (eż: ihammġu, jitfghu karti fit-toroq, jagħmlu vandaliżmu, etc)</li> <li>○ <b>Grupp C u D:</b> Jsemmu xi affarijiet li l-bnedmin</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">15mins</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Social</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Constructivism</i></p> <p>L-istudenti għandhom jitgħallmu minn xulxin u jibnu l-informazzjoni flimkien. Jekk l-istudenti jingħaqdu f'erba' gruppi jkollhom iktar opportunita' u ċans għal diskussjoni</p>

	<p>jaghmlu lil xulxin b'nuqqas ta' tolleranza (eż:pika fil-festi, ġlied, nuqqas ta' tolleranza u aċċettazzjoni lejn religjonijiet, opinjonijiet politiċi differenti)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Naqsmu l-punti fil-grupp il-kbir u niddiskutu:</li> <li>○ Naraw x'inhuma l-fatturi li jikkawżaw dawn l-affarijiet u jekk hemmx xi mezz ta' prevenzjoni biex ma jitwettqux ħsarat...kieku kienu huma li kellhom jiehdu deċiżjoni, x'jaghmlu?</li> <li>○ X'inhuma l-konsegwenzi li jgibu magħhom dawn il-problemi?</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Issir <b>ROLE PLAY</b> fejn jiġu pprezentati sitwazzjonijiet ta' <b>nuqqas ta' rispett lejn l-ambjent U nuqqas ta' rispett lejn xulxin</b> billi:</li> <li>○ L-istudenti jibnu Role Play ibbażata fuq il-punti li jkunu kitbu waqt l-eżerċizzju ta' qabel</li> <li>○ Issir diskussjoni wara kull role play fejn l-istudenti jgħidu l-opinjoni tagħhom dwar iċ-ċirkostanza li jkunu għadhom kemm raw</li> </ul>	<p>15mins</p> <p><i>Social Constructivism</i></p> <p>Jekk ir-role play jibnuha huma stess, l-istudenti ser jinvestu iktar impenn fix-xogħol tagħhom, barra li din l-attività tghinhom jizviluppaw il-kapaċità li jahsbu u jirriflettu</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Jingħata l-aħħar eżerċizzju: Ġejtu magħzula mill-gvern biex tiehdu hsieb problema</li> </ul>	<p><i>Development of argumentation skills through</i></p>

<b>Konkluzjoni</b>	<p>dwar l-ambjent fi playing fields li qed jiġi traskurat u li mhux qed jiġi mittiehed hsieb tiegħu. Offri soluzzjonijiet biex il-membri tal-komunita' jibdew jiehdu nteress f'dan il-playing fields u ghid ghaliex huwa importanti li jagħtu dan is-servizz. Ikteb ftit punti.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ L-istudenti għandhom joffru soluzzjonijiet għal nuqqas ta' tolleranza u jgħidu li kieku kienu huma kif jippruvaw itemmu l-gwerer li hawn fid-dinja.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Social Constructivism</i></p> <p>Permezz tas-Social Constructivism, trid tiġi emfazzjata in-natura soċjali ta' kif il-bnedmin jitgħallmu. Għaldaqstant, dan it-tip ta' eżerċizzju jgħin lill-istudenti jsaħħu l-interazzjoni soċjali ta' bejniethom.</p> <p>10mins</p>
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**Teaching Strategies:**

1. Jintużaw posters u flash cards biex l-istudenti jifhmu x'inhu jingħad b' mod viżwali
2. Brainstorming
3. Group work
4. Role play
5. Diskussjoni

**Assessment Indicators:**

1. Diskussjoni
2. Group work, partecipazzjoni u punti li jinħargu minn kull grupp

**Attivitajiet:**

1. Role Play
2. Group work

**Riżorsi:**

Whiteboard, whiteboard markers, posters, worksheets li għandhom jintużaw waqt ir-role play

**Evalwazzjoni tal-Lezzjoni:**

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## Pajjiżna: Nies, Komunitajiet, Ambjent

**Sub-Title:** SOLUZZJONIJIET għall-problemi fl-ambjent fiżiku u dak soċjali

**Data:** 9 ta' Dicembru 2008

**Klassi:** Form 2

**Tul tal-Lezzjoni:** 45 minuta

**Għan tal-Lezzjoni:**

- L-istudenti għandhom ikunu kapaċi jagħrfu tipi ta' problemi li jistgħu jinholqu meta l-bnedmin ma jiddux hsieb l-ambjent soċjali u dak naturali li jgħixu fih
- Iridu juru l-abilta' li joffru soluzzjonijiet dwar it-tipi ta' problemi li niltaqgħu magħhom f'dan l-ambjent

**Organizzazzjoni tal-Lezzjoni:**

<b>Sezzjoni tal-Lezzjoni</b>	<b>Deskrizzjoni</b>	<b>Hin assenjat</b>
<b>Introduzzjoni</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Jinkiteb it-titlu u l-istudenti għandhom jiktbu taht żewġ kolonni hsarat li jsiru fuq l-ambjent u hsarat li jsiru fuq in-nies</li><li>○ Isir brainstorming dwar dak li kitbu</li><li>○ Nidhlu fid-dettall dwar il-punti li ssemmev</li></ul>	10mins

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Punti importanti jinkitbu fuq il-board</li> </ul>	
<b>Żvilupp tal-Lezzjoni</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ L-istudenti jinghaqdu f'zewġ gruppi biex jiktbu ftit punti dwar żewġ sitwazzjonijiet ta' hsara fuq l-ambejnt u hsara fuq il-bnedmin</li> <li>○ Grupp A: Jsemmu xi affarijiet li l-bniedem jagħmel biex ma jkunx qed jieħu hsieb l-ambjent (eż: iħammġu, jitfgħu karti fit-toroq, jagħmlu vandalizmu, etc)</li> <li>○ Grupp B: Jsemmu xi affarijiet li l-bnedmin jagħmlu lil xulxin b'nuqqas ta' tolleranza (eż:pika fil-festi, ġlied, nuqqas ta' tolleranza u aċċettazzjoni lejn religjonijiet, opinjonijiet politiċi differenti)</li> <li>○ Naqsmu l-punti fil-grupp il-kbir</li> </ul>	10mins
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Tingħata ROLE PLAY (tingħata lesta, it-tfal iridu jirreċtawha) fejn jiġu pprezentati sitwazzjonijiet ta' <b>nuqqas ta' rispett lejn l-ambjent U nuqqas ta' rispett lejn xulxin</b></li> <li>○ Issir diskussjoni wara kull role play fejn l-istudenti jgħidu l-opinjoni tagħhom dwar iċ-ċirkostanza li jkunu għadhom kemm raw</li> </ul>	15mins
<b>Konkluzjoni</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Jingħata l-Home Work:</li> </ul> <p>Gejtu magħzula mill-gvern biex tieħdu hsieb problema dwar l-ambjent fi playing fields li qed jiġi traskurat u li</p>	

	<p>mhux qed jigi mittiehed hsieb tieghu. Offri soluzzjonijiet biex il-membri tal-komunita' jibdew jiehdu nteress f'dan il-playing fields u ghid ghaliex huwa importanti li jaghtu dan is-servizz. Ikteb ftit punti.</p>	<p>10mins</p>
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**Teaching Strategies:**

Brainstorming  
 Group work  
 Role play  
 Diskussjoni

**Assessment Indicators:**

Diskussjoni  
 Group work participation u punti li jinħargu minn kull grupp

**Attivitajiet:**

Role Play u Group work

**Rizorsi:**

Whiteboard, whiteboard markers, posters, worksheets għal role play

**Tahriġ ghad-dar:**

Ġejtu magħzula mill-gvern biex tiehdu hsieb problema dwar l-ambjent fi playing fields li qed jigi traskurat u li mhux qed jigi mittiehed hsieb tieghu. Offri soluzzjonijiet biex il-membri tal-komunita' jibdew jiehdu nteress f'dan il-playing fields u ghid ghaliex huwa importanti li jaghtu dan is-servizz. Ikteb ftit punti.

**Evalwazzjoni tal-Lezzjoni:**

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