

Problem-Solving Scenarios

Description

Students work in small groups to analyze a problem and discuss possible solutions. Students may work from written scenarios, situation cards or cues, or they may create their own situations. Scenarios used in the classroom often use a problem related to a “hot topic”.

Purpose

Scenarios are an excellent way to build problem solving skills and enhance literacy and communication skills. As students read a scenario, they are engaged in texts that require thinking. Students learn to use their thinking skills to analyze the situation, identify the problem, brainstorm ideas, and consider the consequences for each idea. Scenarios allow teachers to gain insights into what students are thinking about and how they interpret particular situations.

What to Do

Select several scenarios, create your own, or work with the students to describe a hot situation in which they have found themselves. Choose one scenario to discuss with the entire group, modeling the steps you want students to take as they discuss the scenario in a group or in pairs.

Students or the teacher:

1. Read the scenario and clarify key vocabulary.
2. Identify the problem and clearly state it or write it down.
3. Brainstorm possible solutions (without getting bogged down in what may or may not work).
4. Select reasonable solutions worth discussing and lay out the consequences for each.
5. Decide as a group on one solution that might work, and, if appropriate, also identify minority opinions if the group cannot agree.
6. Report the solution along with a rationale to the rest of the group.

The teacher then debriefs with the students, summarizing the problem, and highlighting the solutions that were offered along with the reasons behind each solution. The teacher links the discussion back to similar topics that have been studied and discussed in class and makes connections to students' lives.

Keep in Mind:

- Make sure students are comfortable working in small groups or in pairs so that the activity doesn't not fall flat.

- Select situations that are likely to engage your students. For beginners, use problems that you have heard them discuss or that are part of their every day life. For more advanced students, connect the scenario to a topic that students have read about or that has been in the news.
- Introduce the scenario orally to make sure students are with you. Clarify vocabulary and allow students to work in pairs or small groups with the content of the scenario to ensure comprehension (e.g., question generating and answering; filling out an Event Map; T/F questions etc).
- Make sure scenarios allow for a variety of opinions even if discussions might get contentious.
- Walk around to keep students on track and clarify the problem (some students get off track quite easily).
- Avoid identifying one right solution since the point of the lesson is to help students think things through on their own. Discourage silly answers and highlight what consequences might be when questionable solutions are suggested.
- If there is an important point you want students to take away from the discussion highlight that point at the end of the lesson. Restate the points that students have made that are worth thinking about and remembering.