This paper is taken from

Future Citizens in Europe
Proceedings of the fourth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network

London: CiCe 2002

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe,   ISBN 1 85377 356 5

Developing civic dispositions by generating experiences around democratic ideals

Doyle Stevick
Indiana University (USA)

The problem of civic attitudes

Ever since one of my Latin students shot eleven people on a racially-motivated killing spree, killing himself and two others, I have been trying to understand how such a student could attend a top United States high school and two fine universities while holding such antisocial views. Why had my constant criticisms of the Romans' xenophobia and sexism just bounced off, as powerless as shampoo commercials?

The media called him "the white supremacist" Benjamin 'August' Smith. It is a powerful label. Had I not known him, it would never have occurred to me that he was a person. Before the shootings, to me he was just Ben, an unmotivated, introverted and otherwise unremarkable young man with average-length brown-hair.[1] My classroom arrangements, however, did not allow me to know him, or his views, very well. He did not see many of his fellow Americans as humans, and strangely, now the media were encouraging a similar response to him, often featuring an outdated photo of him with a shaved-head, glaring at the camera. The media image matched my stereotype: the skinhead, exuding hatred, instantly detectable. How much more complex the reality was. Columbine High School and 9/11[2] were no different. Many would flatly deny that the perpetrators of these terrible crimes were, or had ever been, human. We are all susceptible to the complex processes that dehumanise others, that portray some people as irredeemably evil. In this sense, we have more in common with 'skinheads' than we care to admit.

In the U.S. we did not lose much sleep over the incineration of 14 year-old boys, so long as reports of their deaths were prefaced with "Taliban" or "al-Qaeda".[3] The term 'American' functioned in the same way for the hijackers, who were not troubled by the fate of people who were labeled infidel and collaborator, and who died on the planes and at work. Those labels - words, the very medium of communication - distort rather than humanise. Neither my student, the Columbine high-school shooters, nor the hijackers were poor or uneducated.

---

[1] I have elsewhere written about my experience with Ben, using the writings of Martin Luther King to reflect on the need for individual transformation in the wake of the societal transformation accomplished by Civil Rights Movement. (This paper was selected by a Martin Luther King essay competition.) Please email me for a copy.

[2] Said "nine-eleven," this is the standard reference to the attacks. Since Americans put the month before the date, it is often confusing to Europeans who use 9/11 to refer to the November 9th collapse of the Berlin Wall.

[3] The journalist John Pilger, a critic of the bombing of Afghanistan, noted that child soldiers there, who may have had no choice but to take up arms, were dehumanised by the label 'Taliban.' His provocative writings, with which there is much to argue, are available at his website, www.johnpilger.com.

We like to invoke ignorance as the cause of such barbarism, and education as the answer, but the circumstances undermine this traditional panacea for the problems of the world. We can no longer answer with that empty cliché, education, but must instead answer deeper questions. What kind of education do we need? What would a genuinely humanising education require? How can education transform deeply held anti-social or anti-democratic dispositions? If I had thought Ben's case an anomaly, then the racist killing of five by a Pittsburgh neighbour, and an African-American's targeting of whites, including an old colleague of my parents, occurring within months, made the problem clear. Were these events uniquely American, products of a gun-permeated culture? I see Rwanda/Burundi, 9/11 and the retaliation, Yugoslavia and Albania, Palestine and Israel, Haider, Le Pen and the late Fortuyn, and suspect that we all need effective humanising education.

I understood slowly that the social awareness and sensitivity that undermine divisive ideologies are no different to the civic dispositions required for a healthy democracy. The development of positive civic dispositions, therefore, is central not only to civic education but to effective schooling generally. It is also an elusive goal. Tom Vontz's study of Project Citizen in Indiana, Latvia and Lithuania demonstrated its success in promoting civic knowledge and skills, but revealed that even this valuable program did little to improve several critical civic dispositions.[4] Fortunately, certain kinds of active learning can successfully promote the development of civic dispositions, and these techniques can be integrated into larger programs and used throughout the curriculum.[5]

I will discuss one approach and why it seems to work. A useful model of how values, attitudes and beliefs develop and change can guide attempts to challenge anti-social beliefs and develop positive dispositions. I discuss how teachers can structure their classes and develop, quickly and easily, appropriate active-learning techniques, in order to reduce the hostility and sense of threat too often generated by encounters with difference.

I had to accept that my anti-racist claims or arguments had very little impact on Ben's beliefs. Reading Martin Luther King's accounts of confrontations with racism showed me that while words could relay information, clarify and explain, or even inspire, words alone could seldom dislodge, challenge, or undermine deeply help beliefs. Rather, words have most power when they bring understanding to prior experiences, or help us see something already known in new, more satisfactory ways. The most effective education would provide experiences, build in independent thought and reflection, and then explore the words and multiple perspectives that best enlighten that experience. Students develop

---

[4] Vontz, T.S., K. K. Metcalf, and J.J. Patrick, *Project Citizen and the Civic Development of Adolescent Students in Indiana, Latvia, and Lithuania*, ERIC, Bloomington, 2000
[5] While the idea of developing activities around civic dispositions is my own, Eliot Aronson provides a complementary technique called the Jigsaw method. It is available at his website, www.jigsaw.org, and is featured in his wonderful and highly readable book, *Nobody Left to Hate*, W. H. Freeman and Company, New York, 2000. This book provides a good overview of social psychology research that is helpful for understanding students' reactions to school.

understanding of their experiences communally. They regularly encounter multiple ways of understanding the same event. If conducted successfully, providing appropriate experiences and a safe climate for discussion can both undermine unwarranted notions of certainty and, just as importantly, transform encounters with 'difference' from threatening experiences to enriching ones.

Hermeneutics, identity, difference

Hermeneutics provides a helpful model of human growth or change.[6] According to this view, understanding is not merely an intellectual activity, it is what it means to be human. We are constantly making sense of the world. If we are contradicted or lose an argument, we frequently become angry or upset; but we rarely simply accept the opposing view. Our beliefs are not easily dislodged by contrary arguments, no matter how rational. This reveals, I believe, three things. First, ideas and beliefs are part of who we are, part of our identities. Therefore, a challenge to our beliefs can seem to be a personal attack, a threat. We become defensive and uncomfortable. These are not the conditions under which children learn or develop effectively. Second, it suggests that the reasoned destruction of another's views is much more likely to win an argument than to persuade the opponent, and thus should be used with great care in educational settings, particularly with younger children. Third, it shows how emotionally charged learning can be. Ideas and beliefs are seldom neutral. The emotionally-charged nature of learning is not inherently good or bad: emotions can muddle our reasoning and also motivate and enhance engagement. Finding the right balance, and fostering students' ability to think clearly while caring deeply, offers educators a worthwhile challenge.

Shaun Gallagher's discussion of hermeneutics provides a model of how people develop and change. If we picture a person, we can imagine that behind her are all the things that have made her who she is; her culture, language, history, experiences, family, and so on. These things also shape how she experiences an event or encounter, how she perceives it through the lens of her background and experience. Because people have unique backgrounds and experiences, a similar encounter can be experienced and understood quite differently. These experiences in turn change the person, which also alters her relationship with her past and background. It is a continuous cycle, one that suits Dewey's call for the continuous expansion of related experiences.

We can, however, enter an encounter more or less receptive to the experience. If we know this encounter will challenge our views, we are likely to put up walls to protect our beliefs and ourselves. For this reason, direct challenges to beliefs are rarely effective. Consider the U.S. school experience of a (so-called) Christian-fundamentalist boy whose religious beliefs sometimes contradict the liberal values central to democracy. When confronted

---

[6] Thomas A. Schwandt's *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2001, briefly explains the ideas of the different schools of hermeneutics. Although there are two editions of the dictionary of terms, they are both helpful. His is the clearest exposition of many complex ideas connected to qualitative inquiry that I have encountered. Of particular interest is the chart on page 113 which explains Gallagher's ideas from his *Hermeneutics and Education*, SUNY, 1992. The ideas of the next three paragraphs emerged from this work and two seminars with the author.

with a value contrary to his religious upbringing, he is not confronted merely with conflicting ideas to be sorted out rationally. To the child it seems that he is being told that his belief is wrong, and that he is wrong. Discomfort, a sense of being threatened and unwelcome, and other negative responses are likely to result. If he and his belief are wrong, something must be wrong with how he knows. And since the idea comes from his family, he is being told that his parents, the primary authority figures in his life, are wrong, that the trust he has in his parents is wrong. And if the belief comes from the family's religious tradition, then not only are the trusted adults in the religious community wrong, his god is wrong. A child cannot articulate these feelings, but the resulting tension and discomfort can be, at best, counterproductive, and at worst, destructive.

The final important component of hermeneutics in this context involves the fear, threat, or sense of danger from something that is alien. I could not understand, for example, how anyone could hate homosexuals so much that they would abduct Matthew Shephard, beat and leave him to die on a post, especially in a country that emphasises freedom and a live-and-let-live ethos. But the idea of identity may help. Many people seem to experience their own heterosexuality as 'natural' and thus as 'right', so the presence of a homosexual may constitute an implicit rejection of what seems natural and right to them, and since homosexuality is rooted in behaviour (rather than skin color), homosexuals are making a 'choice'. This 'choice' rejects a central part of the identity, or self-understanding of some heterosexuals. Compounded by the selective, often spurious, use of religious texts, just being homosexual can threaten others' sense of identity and faith.[7] The logical inconsistency of 'choice' - few heterosexuals imagine that they made a choice to be the way they are - shows the relative powerlessness of reason in the face of deeply held beliefs.

Beyond words: creating experiences

Words are imperfect vessels, and deeply meaningful insights are often reduced to empty clichés when spoken. Part of our challenge as educators is to find ways to reintroduce meaning to hollow words. When I discuss the Titanic, telling students that the water was three degrees Celsius below zero and that the lifeboats were twenty-five metres above the water, it has little effect. When they submerge their arms in ice-water, or stretch out across the three-hundred metre length of the Titanic and stand against a twenty-five metre building looking up, a different kind of understanding is brought to these empty facts. The words now describe familiar experiences. If I simply tell students that a rape occurs every six minutes in my country, the effect is much less than that of being disrupted by an alarm every six minutes for an hour and a half, particularly if they are not told immediately why the alarm is disturbing the class so frequently. It makes a profound difference: these physical experiences add substance to passing words.

More important still are social dynamics. All the civic dispositions and understandings we hope to promote arise from real situations. The need for tolerance, for example, self-interest rightly understood, self-efficacy, responsibility and participation, the problem of

---

[7] Bishop John Shelby Spong makes a powerful case against the apparently homophobic passages of the Old and New Testaments in Chapters 5 and 9 of his book, *Living in Sin?*

the tyranny of the majority, the conflict between the individual good and the common good, all come from historical experience. Attempts to pass on those values, however worthy they are, fall flat when the students do not have relevant experience.

Any value that arises from social situations can be recreated in classroom experiences or simulations. One famous case in Iowa involved a teacher who was trying to explain the Civil Rights Movement to students in a school where everyone was white. She separated the blue eyes from the brown eyes, and suggested that one group was smarter than the other.[8] This became one of the students' most powerful experiences. Though this case could be ethically problematic today, it shows how an issue can be converted into an experience.

Many students also feel powerless, which is a real barrier to student engagement and action. How could I reveal aspects of their power persuasively? I found a culturally-appropriate activity: I ask what American university students would do for two American dollars - and they stand on desks, howl at the moon, turn their clothes inside out, etc. When I require them to reflect and write about the moral of this activity, they soon hit upon the power of money, even in the world's richest country. Since they spend money very frequently, they are exercising and distributing power. Are they distributing power in ethical ways? Once they see what they will do for a little money, they can better understand the power money has over the three billion people who survive on less than two dollars a day.

A second challenge is that many students in Indiana, where I teach, feel little connection with what is happening in the world, and little responsibility for it. How best to reveal this link? I ask them to catalog the countries from which their clothes come. Lists typically include thirty countries. The discussion is then very rich: we can ask what percentage are made in democracies, what the average income is in those countries, why companies locate there, and what relationship and responsibilities we have towards the people who make our clothes. We visit www.thehungersite.com,[9] which shows, proportionally, where people are starving to death by blacking out a different country every four seconds, and consider the relative starvation rates in countries that make clothes. This website permits people to make free daily food donations to starving people in exchange for viewing advertisements. The amount seems small, but when each student in a class fills a cup with water and puts it into a bucket, it becomes quite heavy. Students understand better the power of collective action and that their small part can make a difference in world problems. When the thirty-five of us calculate how much we would

---

[8] This famous case has been featured in a number of documentaries.

[9] This site also has a partner, www.therainforestsite.com, which purchases a square meter of land for preservation and can also be visited daily. The maps on both sites are very helpful. While I had some discomfort with the idea of advocating exposure to advertisements, this provides a way to channel advertising towards positive social ends and encourages, I hope, businesses to realize that there is support and a market for socially responsible behavior. Like filling the bucket with water, students can line up a meter apart outside, march forward a ninety meters, and consider that space the amount they could save with regular action.

give if we all visited daily for three months, we realise that we could provide a ton of food. Thus we understand the cumulative consequences of apparently small actions. Even small actions or experiences like these, reflected upon and discussed, can provide a more meaningful, even transforming, experience.

The process

At a certain age, stories no longer offer a moral; we often learn from obedience, or to achieve an unrelated goal, and fail to think about the meaning of what we study. Students are asked to think like young children, when every story has a moral lesson. Applying this principle to experiences, suggesting that we can learn from everything we do, prepares students for reflective, life-long learning from their experiences.[10] Students undergo experiences without being told the purpose, only that there is one and they must try to find the lesson(s). Once the experience has been conducted, students are asked to reflect silently on and write about the lessons to be derived for three to ten minutes, depending on the length and complexity of the story or experience. Building in time for students to think independently is critical. Once they have recorded their conclusions, students share ideas. They see that they have unique perspectives and that everybody has something to offer. This generates confidence in their ability to think and participate. This process, if regularly practiced, helps students understand that there are multiple, valid and enlightening ways to understand any situation. Students understand that they and their colleagues are smart, and that they can learn from people who see things differently. This process can generate a healthy respect and desire for diversity. Difference becomes less threatening and more enriching. Eventually, disagreement occurs within a safe context; rather than threatening core beliefs, it offers the opportunity to correct misunderstandings.

Students can engage in these activities without the sense that their beliefs are being challenged or that there is one right answer that they must accept. As a result, the experience is not threatening or coercive. Creating room for independent thinking as part of the structure of teaching confers respect for the students, a critical element of a safe learning environment. Because each student must reflect on the experience first, any contradictions with previous beliefs or ideas are developed internally rather than imposed externally. The tension comes on an individual level from cognitive dissonance, not from public conflict. They have the freedom and intellectual autonomy to come to their own conclusions, and modify them based on what they hear from others. Because different views come from fellow students, conflicting positions are not attached to the authority of the teacher. Teachers are able to say, "Good idea, I never thought of that," to students, which heightens the democratic relationship to the creation of knowledge and the sense that learning is omni-directional, not simply transmitted from teacher to student.

Though these ideas work well with young children, I use these approaches successfully with university students. (Aronson's wonderful book, *Nobody Left to Hate*, develops a

---

[10] Once I had developed the ideas of constructing experiences, I found John Dewey's short and clear book, *Experience and Education*, Touchstone, New York, 1997, very enlightening. Since Dewey can be very difficult, if not unpleasant, to read, this piece was especially rewarding.

similar approach.)   It promotes productive habits of mind, hinders the development of dangerous, exclusive identities, and encourages a democratic way of living. At older ages, students must come to understand the international forces that compel global migration, and understand their own insecurity not in personal terms, as a result of evil immigrants, but as a product of global forces. People, especially people who are different, are the easiest targets for the discomfort of rapid change and impersonal forces.

Please write for additional activities (estevick@indiana.edu); works in the footnotes are strongly recommended. I hope the process of developing experiences around civic ideals, building in silent reflection, then exploring multiple perspectives is clear and helpful.