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Effective civic learning by reflective civic action: theory and practice of experiential civic education

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Introduction

Having been involved in civic education for quite some time, my perception is that we should do much better in preparing our students to sustain their present and future roles as enlightened and autonomous citizens, able and willing to carry on with the project of a humane and democratic society. I do not suggest that we should reinvent the wheel and develop completely new strategies - appropriate concepts of effective civic learning have been available since John Dewey began writing about democracy, experience, and education.

This paper wants to make the case for a learning strategy of effective civic learning by reflective civic action (a concept known as experiential civic learning) by summarising the rationale and the urgent need for this learning strategy and by pointing out some of its core elements in order to make experiential civic learning perhaps more plausible and convincing.

The rationale of experiential (civic) learning

The roots of experiential learning trace back to the American philosopher and advocate of educational pragmatism John Dewey. More than seven decades ago he criticised traditional classroom education as merely meeting the demands of industrial capitalism and as such being based on the dualisms of mind and body, mind and world, ignoring individuals as active learners. Dewey considered traditional education ‘undemocratic, since it is hierarchically structured ..., and separates experience from learning’ (NSEE, 1997, p 2). According to Dewey, experience-oriented education intends to be ‘holistic and integrative, based on the process of making meaning out of experience’ (*ibid*) to the learner. Experiential education aims at (re)unifying perception and reflection, experience and knowledge, mind and body, individual and (public) community; it maintains ‘that knowledge is individually and communally constructed by people as they reflect on the world around them’ (NSEE, 1997, p 3). In this regard experiential learning is to contribute to fostering citizenship in democratic societies (see Dewey, 1916; 1927; 1938).

Today’s most established model of experiential learning is the one developed by David Kolb. Kolb defines learning as an ‘active, self-directed process ... whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (Kolb, 1984, pp 36, 38). In his model the learning process begins with an experience (‘concrete experience’), which is followed by reflection (‘reflective observation’). The reflection is then assimilated into a theory (‘abstract conceptualisation’), and finally these new or reformulated assumptions are tested in new situations (‘active experimentation’) (Kolb, 1984, pp 30, 33, 42).

Since experiential learning has referred to individuals communicating and acting within their (public) environment, experiential learning has implicitly been experiential *civic* learning – according to Dewey – in a democratic community. It seems as if Dewey's calls for 'education for democracy' (see Dewey, 1916) and thus for experiential civic education are not at all reminiscences of past decades. There obviously are various reasons for revitalising and fostering those calls at present.

The increasing need for experiential civic learning

My assumption is that extending and intensifying experiential civic learning has become tremendously urgent because

- there is a positive correlation between (early) civic participation and (sustainable) civic learning
- youth attitudes to society and politics require appropriate answers
- recent social and political developments seem to impede – rather than facilitate – the improvement and the shaping of a humane and democratic society.

Sustainable impact of early civic participation

There is convincing evidence of a significant link between early public/civic participation and sustainable civic learning. It is not only that most of us would be able to name a number of biographical examples that would prove the plausibility of this correlation, but there are several empirical findings supporting it:

- As a result of their IEA Civic Education Project covering 24 countries. Judith Torney-Purta *et al.* found: 'Schools that operate in a participatory democratic way ... are effective in promoting both civic knowledge and engagement.' (Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001, p 176)
- Another recent cross-national study dealing with the impact of civic education programs on democratic behavior and attitudes emphasises that 'civic education programs are most effective when ... methods are participatory' (Office of Democracy, 2002, p 1).
- Having analysed the effects of service-learning projects, Andrew Furco stated: 'It is likely that when students are engaged in service activities where they 'have some control' and are really 'making a difference', the overall educational outcomes of the service projects will be greater and more positive in all domains' (Furco, 2002, p 43).
- James Younis *et al.* summarise their study as follows: 'Participation in organisations and movements provides experience with normative civic practices and ideologies, and shapes youth's emerging identities in a long-lasting form. Participating in high school government and partaking in social-political reform share in starting youth on a developmental path toward constructive citizenship.' (Youniss *et al.*, 1997, pp 629-630)

There seems to be quite a consensus as far as the correlation between early public/civic participation and sustainable civic learning is concerned. As an obvious response to these findings (civic) educators should offer meaningful participatory experiences in their schools and classes.

Youth attitudes to society and politics

Various studies on youth attitudes very clearly show twofold findings concerning public participation:

The American 'New Millennium Project Part I' points out that 'youth today are actually more involved in volunteering than their peers were a decade ago'. On the other hand this study comes to the result that 'these volunteer activities most often take the form of social service', that 'youth participation ... remains distinctly apolitical' (*New Millennium Project*, 1999, pp 15-16).

The well reputed German youth report *14. Shell-Jugendstudie*, has verified this ambivalent finding: 'Although youth are distant from politics, many of them are socially involved in their environment.' (Deutsche Shell, 2002, p 26)

These twofold empirical findings offer a challenge to civic education: civic education should take this opportunity and foster social participation but should avoid operating only in social and charity contexts and aim at transferring social participation into public policy participation.

De-civilisation – re-civilisation

Experiential civic (political!) learning strategies will be a response to a general social and political development which Klaus Schmals and Hubertus Heinelt have called 'de-civilisation':

Western societies have gradually developed to 'societies at risk' (Beck, 1986), in which irreversible processes of modernisation ('risks') threaten human beings, animals and plants much more severely than former 'dangers'. In addition to this tendency societies seem to 'disintegrate' and to 'individualise', that is, people on the one hand enjoy new liberties as a consequence of the falling apart of traditional structures and milieus; on the other hand people are – 'bowling alone' (Putnam) and in competition with others – forced to construct, to patchwork their biographies by themselves. This development tends to diminish prevailing social structures and political dynamics without really replacing them sufficiently. The process of 'globalisation' de-borders politics, especially the possibilities of democratic control of political processes.

We have to face various phenomena of what Benjamin Barber called 'thin democracy': the political apathy of increasing numbers of people, arrogance of power as a more or less normal attitude of the political class, liberal rights under increasing threat etc. The increasing 'symbolisation of politics', reinforced by the tremendous growth of new

types of mass media, are diminishing the ability of citizens to judge objectively and autonomously. At the same time mass media make people believe that they are being well informed about politics unplugged.

Recent social and political developments like these are likely to let man become object (instead of subject) 'to processes which for him are neither transparent nor controllable' (Münkler, 1997, p 166). This would, in the long run, more probably impede rather than facilitate the process of democratisation and civilisation. In order to diminish this process of de-civilisation it is necessary to re-civilise societies by reclaiming citizens as 'acting subjects' (Münkler, 1997, p 169). This means that 'by means of an extensive participation in politics, emancipatory endeavours have to be made to enable all persons to become autonomous citizens with an enlightened ability of judgement' and the ability 'to act as citizens and experience their ability to be citizens' (Schmidt, 1995, p 576).

If – according to these assumptions – acting as citizens and experiencing the ability to be citizens enables people to construct their civil identities in a humane and democratic society, then pedagogical efforts should be directed to creating and offering learning strategies that are oriented towards the notion of public participation as experiential learning.

Overall there seems to be convincing evidence for the urgency of experiential civic learning:

- there is a positive correlation between (early) civic participation and (sustainable) civic learning
- youth attitudes on society and politics require appropriate answers
- recent social and political developments seem to turn out impeding – rather than facilitating – the improvement and the shaping of a humane and democratic society.

Essentials of experiential civic learning

This leads me to my core thesis: experience-oriented learning processes, aiming at the sustainable acquisition of competences which are relevant in politics and civil society, will particularly unfold in the course of the (inter)active, reflective dealing of the individual(s) with the authentic political and social problems and processes that surround and concern them. It represents the complex experience-oriented requirements of civic education, from which the following essentials can be extracted: subject-orientation, action-orientation, problem-orientation, authenticity and policy-orientation (see Koopmann, 1998 a/b).

Subject¹-orientation

Education - in particular political/civic education – can be understood as ‘self-determination’ or can be considered as ‘development of the subject’ (Holsbrecher, 1996, p 45). Students have to be recognised as learning subjects. Learning subjects are not ‘objects’ to be instructed but to a great extent control their learning processes themselves. Subject-oriented (self-determined) learning implies the option of co-operative learning.

Action-orientation

Subject-orientation and action-orientation are closely connected: ‘Man is a subject by acting ... Man is identical with himself ... only as an acting person within concrete issue-related and social fields’ (Dewey – retranslated by the present author – in Kaiser, 1996, p13). Action-oriented learning forms cognition and consciousness, and implies a reflective moment; ‘intelligence does not develop simply as a result of action and experience, it develops as a result of *reflective* action and experience’ (Benson & Harkavy, 1997, p23).

Problem-orientation

Experience-oriented learning that supports the interaction of the learners with their environments clearly receives its decisive educational thrust from specific situations, which stimulate learning actions: ‘Thinking begins in ... a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives’ (Dewey, in Benson & Harkavy, 1997, p 17). Dilemmas or problems, however, call for solutions. This idea of problem-orientation has lead up to various concepts of problem-solving learning, like the CPS-model developed by Isaksen *et al.* (see Isaksen *et al.*, 1994), and of specific variants of community-oriented as well as classroom-linked service-learning concepts (see Furco, 2002).

Authenticity

The objects, situations and processes of learning by acting are authentic if they are original, not pre-decided but open-ended. In the course of the students’ actions, the activities may have real (rather than assumed or simulated) consequences, for themselves, for other people, and for public affairs – with significant impact on acquiring responsibility. The notion of authenticity must relate to the entirety of the students’ active and passive experiences, to experiences inside and outside schools, which are often community related.

¹ The term ‘subject’ in this context does not refer to subjects, disciplines taught in the classroom. It is rather to be understood as synonymous with ‘self-determined individual’, and in so far antonymous to the term ‘object’.

Policy-orientation

The concept of experiential civic/political education must ensure that, in the process, the learner is not restricted to charity and social matters. The problems being dealt with are public problems to be solved with public policies. In doing so, the learners learn about political content (policy), institutional frameworks (polity), and decision-making processes (politics) in a functional way.

The brief draft of these five essentials of experiential civic education should support my core thesis: experience-oriented learning processes, aimed at the sustainable acquisition of competences which are relevant in politics and civil society, will particularly unfold in the course of the (inter)active, reflective dealing of the individual(s) with the authentic political and social problems and processes that surround and concern them.

Experiential civic learning in practice: ‘Project Citizen’ / ‘Projekt: Aktive Bürger’

One example of how to practice an experiential learning strategy in the context of civic education is being well demonstrated by the program ‘Projekt: Aktive Bürger’ (CCE & Koopmann, 2001), the German adaptation of ‘We the People ... Project Citizen’ (CCE, 1995; see Koopmann, 2002), designed by the American Center for Civic Education (CCE). This program actively engages middle-school students in learning how to monitor and influence public policy and encourages civic participation among students, their parents, and members of the community. As a class project, students work together and accomplish the following steps:

1. students begin identifying public problems in their community that they think are important
2. the class decides upon the problem to solve
3. the students will gather and evaluate information about the problem from a variety of sources
4. in the fourth step the students will examine possible solutions and alternative policies being suggested by political institutions, by groups of people, like non-governmental institutions etc.
5. next the class will develop a public policy to solve the problem
6. the students will develop a detailed action plan
7. in the seventh step the students will develop a portfolio displaying the essential steps taken during the active learning process.

Now the class presents its portfolio to the public to show how they suggest solving the public problem they investigated, and how they intend to influence the political institutions, governmental agencies, public administration etc. to adopt their proposed public policy. The class will actively participate in the public policy process dealing with the problem. The class keeps in close contact with the political institutions and the public administration implementing the solution the class has worked out. Finally the class reflects on their learning experience.

The original 'We the People ... Project Citizen' as well as the German adaptation 'Projekt: Aktive Bürger' perfectly combine – as evidenced by the ten steps drafted – core-elements of experiential civic learning: students learn by (inter)acting, by cooperating and reflecting in the context of an authentic policy process dealing with an authentic public problem.

Conclusion

The concept of effective civic learning by reflective civic doing, i.e. the strategy of experiential civic learning, seems to be an appropriate means of meeting the pedagogical advantages of early public participation as well as twofold youth attitudes to society and politics and the challenges of de-civilisation, because this learning strategy offers young people the possibility to act reflectively as citizens and experience their ability to be citizens.

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