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Identity, citizenship and socio-moral excellence: the role of higher education

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This paper will analyse the connections between identity, citizenship and higher education and raise the following key question: how can we organise the college environment in such a way that it truly becomes a learning environment, fostering student excellence, intellectual sophistication, the moral self and democratic citizenship? A short review of empirical findings about identity, citizenship and socio-moral excellence leads us to identify how educational contexts contribute to foster excellence and the moral self.

Ideally, higher education should be always conceived as a full cultural experience, where students find opportunities to improve their knowledge in different fields, as well as the motivation to be life-long multifaceted learners and develop a critical social consciousness (Martín, Estrada and Bara, 2002; Jennings, 1995).

Empirical evidence stresses the fact that students' civic and socio-moral development does not depend only on individual characteristics. Institutional aspects such as curriculum, the cultural climate and organisational ethos play a role, and sometimes act as tipping points to the definition of students' morality and citizenship. This evidence requires us to state clearly the ethical principles and pedagogical strategies underlying our efforts to teach students. This paper addresses these principles and presents some useful strategies to foster students' intellectual and moral self and democratic citizenship.

Identity, citizenship and education

Since the publication of Berger and Luckman's (1983) major work, many authors have regarded identity as a connection between the psychological and sociological spheres of human life. Identity includes the representation of the individual through their own social roles, the group(s) they belong to and their position in society. The concept of social identity – 'those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he belongs' – has become the core of psychological theories on inter-group relations.

But the social identity tradition tends to ignore the idea that although social categories are basic references for self-definition (Abrams, 1999; Tajfel, 2004), a constructive dimension of social identity also exists. People actively construct their identities around a plurality of points of view, political tendencies, and ways of involvement in the broader society. Besides, the psychological organisation of identity is made up of a network of conceptions of self (eg, being a student, white, female, left wing, etc), which sometimes collide and conflict.

If one bears in mind this multiplicity of identities, identity can be better conceived as a set of beliefs which are progressively modified as the result of individual experiences, social contexts and inter-subjective social practices (cf Gergen, 1988; Smith, 1999). While communicating and participating in these practices, the individual modifies them and creates new ways of being and behaving in the social world. The process of communication presupposes a constant negotiation of meanings and images (eg, Bruner,

1991; Moscovici, 1984; Simons, Mechling, Schreier, 1984), including the representation of self, duty, rights and responsibilities.

From such an approach, citizenship may be regarded as the social-political sphere of identity. It is not a mere combination of rights and obligations to be played in the public and political sphere. Hater refers to citizenship as one among many identities of the individual, helping 'to tame the divisive passion of other identities' (1990, p 184, cit. in Ichilov, 2003, p 642). Citizenship highlights our loyalties, duties and doubts regarding communities of belonging and the expectations about the way we should be treated, either as individuals or members of groups. It entails legal, ethical and normative questions about self, rights and duties, the worldviews shared with a culture of reference, and the aspirations and claims for the good life.

Banks' concept of multiple identities (Banks, 1981) helps us to see how these loyalties evolve from the sphere of ethnic identity, through the sphere of national identity (representation of self as member of a nation, sharing common cultural elements relevant for collective conscience), to global identity, the representation of self as a member of a world society, where all human beings share genetic, legal and ethical commonalities, the basis for inalienable human dignity.

As a consequence of globalisation, traditional communities (the groups from which we learn ethnic identification) and the state (where we learn national identity) have lost much of their ability to support the citizen's representation of self at the highest level, the level that permits us to understand, respect and accept social pluralism and the basic values of democratic citizenship. This feature has been taken over by education and its power to help youngsters become better persons and true citizens in a plural, uncertain and global world.

While some authors claim that there are no canons regarding education for democratic citizenship, and others have stressed the need to inculcate political knowledge through academic subjects, and also specific virtues and skills needed for democratic citizenship, it is a fact that education is always an effort to make students become better persons and citizens. This intention relies on ideological, political, and ethical considerations about the person and the ideal society.

In contemporary democratic societies, the idea that there is a critical link between education and citizenship persists. School and colleges are viewed as the loci for citizenship education, either in the specific or the diffuse form of this concept[1]. It is also expected that education in general and citizenship education in particular will help students to develop knowledge about contemporary world problems (peace, environment, sustainable development, relations between people and nations…), humanistic values (dignity, ecological concerns, empathy, justice) and skills such as reflexivity, critical thought, cooperation and tolerance.

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[1] Bricker distinguishes specific and diffuse citizenship in the following terms: 'Specific citizenship education proceeds through (…) activities (such as civic classes or service learning programs) that are specifically designed to prepare for citizenship, as well as through the 'hidden curriculum' [including] the school climate. 'Diffuse citizenship education' refers to the educational attainment in general'. (1989, p2, cit. in Ichilov, 2003, p645).

UNESCO states clearly that institutions of higher education should make these commitments and educate 'for citizenship and for active participation in society, with a worldwide vision, for endogenous capacity-building, and for the consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice' (UNESCO, 1998, article 1). It is clear that if higher education is to accomplish these goals, it must influence student intellectual, ethical and civic development. Can we expect it to have this power?

College's impact on students' socio-moral, intellectual and civic development

So far, research on the impact of colleges on students' development and identity shows that college does have a net effect on students' socio-moral and civic development and their civic attitudes and behaviours (Arnold & King, 1997; Astin, 1997; Pascarella & Terensini, 1991). Nevertheless, this research does not allow us to speak of a linear causal connection between formal education at college and students' democratic orientation, community involvement, and the capacity to interpret critically the world surrounding them. These positive effects depend also on informal experiences, background, and the intellectual potential of the student. But institutional characteristics, cultural climate and organisational ethos play a role as well.

Astin and Chang (1995, in Astin, 1997), Ehrlich (2002) and Pace (1990, cit. in Kuh, 2002) found that the institutions of higher education that best succeed in developing students' civic, social and moral identity have certain features in common: they have a humanistic orientation and explicit aims in the domain of social responsibility and students' civic involvement; they are centred on students' learning and pedagogy, instead of being merely centred on research and theoretical concerns; they emphasise culture and diversity issues, seeking to improve cultural understanding and pluralism. Moreover, in these institutions, moral issues are completely assumed and incorporated in the curricula; finally, community-based learning is favoured as well as practice in the community. Studies also show that the experience of participating in the definition of institutional policies stimulates several skills (negotiation, conflict mediation, speaking in public, etc.) and raises the belief in personal capacities to produce environmental change. Acting as tutor-student is another powerful experience (Ehrlich, 2002). On the other hand, educational institutions where indoctrination and dogmatism prevail tend to inhibit, instead of fostering, students' intellectual faculties (McNeel, 1994).

My own research (Gonçalves, 2004) brings me to similar conclusions. It reveals strong evidence for the impact of a college's characteristics on students' attitudes concerning the social world and society. The results clearly support the claim that institutions and curricula that provide a large number of significant learning opportunities in important spheres of social, cultural and intellectual life tend to broaden students' intellectual horizons.

Compared with those who had experienced a less positive moral climate at college, the students who met a more democratic, rewarding and flexible educational style at college report a greater impact of the college strengthening their cultural and intellectual interests. Those students who perceive their college/degree as having greater social sensitivity to present-day problems are also those who use more active information-searching strategies (reading books and newspapers, listening to TV news, attending conferences…) and who report more personal initiative in relevant fields (politics,

culture, ecology, science, spirituality…). Students who were given more learning opportunities (role-taking and guided learning) are more active when it comes to searching for social, cultural and intellectual information.

These results help us to define the institutional and educational strategies (including management strategies, curriculum, resources and methodological/ didactical approaches) that better contribute to the students' social, civic and socio-moral development.

Promoting students' intellectual sophistication, moral self and citizenship: some strategies

Institutions of higher education have moral responsibilities to maintain and promote the well-being of society, because they disseminate knowledge and values that have the power to change that very society. So, the key question for those of us involved in higher education is how to produce a learning environment that will foster intellectual, moral and civic excellence? Having highlighted three paramount domains – fostering intellectual sophistication, fostering the moral self and fostering democratic citizenship – I will present a simplified list of strategies stemming from empirical evidence that could be taken as a starting point to expand a student's intellectual horizons and the ability to live together in a pluralistic world.

Fostering intellectual sophistication

Cognitive, social and emotional learning. Learning experiences should always improve reasoning as well as emotional literacy. They should also be planned in such a way that multiple aspects of intelligence are valued, and students may use different intellectual skills to gather information, understand contents and apply them to new situations.

Critical thought, open mindedness and creativity. Debate, questioning, and Socratic methods are good strategies to combat mental resignation and passiveness. They should be used whenever possible. The best lecturers and professors never forget that students form opinions about the issues approached, and learn from discussing them with an audience, comparing different points of view, and relating the issues to other domains of experience and knowledge. Creativity should also be valued, and learning activities should invoke divergent thought, initiative and problem solving.

Risk-taking and challenges acceptance. When excellence is a concern, we should avoid mainstreaming students' minds. Puzzling students with discrepant information and unexpected points of view, proposing uncommon activities and challenging problems, and avoiding the easy way of doing things is a good principle. We should also orient students, guiding their efforts, without doing their job for them. If we show them that we believe they will be able to do it, they will do it.

Flow experience. Learning is best achieved with pleasure instead of boredom. If a task is boring it must be reviewed. As professors, we should improve our abilities to find and highlight interesting features in everything we do when teaching, and in every proposal we make to our students. One important suggestion is to try to know students' special abilities, needs and interests, and to use them as a prerequisite for work.

Fostering the moral self

Positive ethos. Teaching style is one of the most important features when it comes to assessing institutional climate. Research suggests that keeping a democratic, open, authoritative and caring relation with students is the best way to promote satisfaction, motivation and dedication to studies. This relational style is the one that has the greatest influence on students' development, fostering qualities such as caring, social concern and social responsibility as well as self-esteem and self-confidence.

Interdependence (connections in relation to others). Co-operative learning, team work and forums are all very effective methods to help students understand that they are part of a community, and that dialogue, co-operation and mutually supportive relations within and between communities are the seeds of peace and welfare in society.

Self-reflection. Portfolios, class discussion, and teacher and student tutoring are all good methods of keeping the student interested in his or her own development and self-construction.

Fostering democratic citizenship

Service learning programs. Learning opportunities for democratic citizenship exist in civil society, families, media, NGOs, enterprises, local authorities. Colleges should help students to explore these sites and resources. Projects, action research and service learning are occasions for students to test personal strengths and merits. Engaging students in service learning programs develops political knowledge, the ability to evaluate social and political events and sensitivity to social issues.

Exposure to exemplary models. College degrees should expose students to people who are intellectually, socially and morally extraordinary, although they may seem ordinary people: those who struggle with what is the right thing to do; those who 'go against the grain' of conventions; those who try to ensure a democratic world. This exposure can be accomplished through literature, movies, real-life stories…whether historical, contemporary or fictional, these models promote self-reflection and encourage students to commit themselves to a coherent system of values, based on concerns regarding society.

Cultural capital and specific knowledge. Colleges should promote and valorise social and cultural experiences of active citizenship (eg, conferences, debates around striking events in the contemporary world, active projects, international and intercultural experiences…). It should be open (and unprejudiced) to non-academic sites where knowledge circulates and to different ways of expressing ideas, emotions and values.

Information and empowerment. Key features of democratic citizenship should be addressed either directly (through accurate information, both theoretical and experiential) and tacitly (through rules, norms, gender equality and social justice, empowering students to participate actively in the campus life and the college/university management).

Conclusion

Literature provides many examples of how these ideas and strategies apply to particular fields of professional training (eg, teacher training, medicine, journalism, economics) and good practices in these fields are well disseminated. But literature and other good practice should not be understood as recipes. Applying our theoretical knowledge wisely does not

mean reproducing theoretical suggestions and good practices automatically without any reflection upon them. We need to understand the curriculum's aims, we need to define our teaching goals clearly, and we must organise our teaching activities and methods in such a way that they fit in well with the students' background of knowledge, wishes, needs and fears.

How can we promote a society of welfare, mutual understanding, sustainable development, democracy, pluralism, if citizens only know about the technicalities of their jobs and nothing about social life, politics, cultural life, arts, and so on? Becoming the multifaceted individual required by these complex times implies acknowledging the world around us, understanding and connecting events in the different spheres of social life, and having those minimum intellectual, emotional and behavioural tools needed to intervene either in the field of education or in any other part of life in a socially and morally positive way. Higher education plays one of the most important roles in striving toward our common aspirations for a better human society. I believe that strategies such as those presented above could be a pathway bringing us closer to such aims.

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