



This paper is taken from

*The Experience of Citizenship  
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's  
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

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*Gifford, C. (2004) Embedding citizenship in the undergraduate social science curriculum, in Ross, A. (ed) The Experience of Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 93 - 100*

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CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## **Embedding citizenship in the undergraduate social science curriculum**

*Chris Gifford*

Department of Human Sciences, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (UK)

There is current debate over whether proposals on citizenship education can translate into a genuinely democratic and political citizenship or whether they reflect far narrower governmental agendas. In this paper, some of these issues are considered using the example of a project involving undergraduate students going into schools to help deliver citizenship. I discuss the development of policies on citizenship education, both in schools and universities, and consider the opportunities these open up to embed democratic practices within complex modern societies. I go on to outline and discuss a project involving undergraduate students and school pupils. It is argued that this project illustrates spaces within education for genuine forms of active citizenship.

### **The development of citizenship education in the UK: limitations and possibilities**

Citizenship education has been an ongoing matter of academic and political debate in the U.K. since the 1970s (Crick 1978; Wringe 1992; Crick 2000; Frazer 2000; Piper and Piper 2000; Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjaittas 2001). This debate culminated in the setting up of the Advisory Group in citizenship education under the Chairmanship of Bernard Crick and the publication and implementation of its final report. The publication of the Crick Report on *Education for Citizenship and Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (QCA 1998) has influenced the development of citizenship education across the UK from primary level to post-16. Citizenship education has now been established as a statutory component of the compulsory school national curriculum in England and a set of proposals for Scotland were launched in 2002.

The Crick Report is primarily concerned with a revival of national politics and, in so doing, identifies three elements of citizenship education:

- *Social and moral responsibility* – learning self-confidence and socially and morally acceptable behaviour.
- *Community involvement* – learning about and becoming helpfully involved in communities.
- *Political literacy* – learning how to be effective in public life i.e. ‘realistic knowledge of and preparation for conflict resolution and decision making related to the main economic and social problems of the day.’ (QCA 1998: 12-13)

What is considered to be central to the effective realisation of these different elements of education for citizenship is the idea of active citizenship. Specifically, this is to be achieved by voluntary community participation and by encouraging the development of skills and knowledge that enable political and community involvement. Thus, key sections of the Report are directed towards outlining how pupils will become active players in British public life. The Report states that ‘it is difficult to conceive of pupils as active citizens if their experience of learning in citizenship has been predominantly

passive' (QCA 1998: 37). Overall, the Report sets out the ambitious objective of changing the British political culture so that 'people think of themselves as active citizens, willing able and equipped to have an influence on public life' (ibid: 7).

There remains a question over the extent to which policies for citizenship education can generate a genuinely political and participatory form of citizenship amongst young people. From such critical perspective, citizenship education represents a 'smokescreen of activity' that hides the failure by governments to address the structural disadvantage faced by young people in modern Britain (Piper and Piper 2000). In fact, potentially it represents an extension of forms of governmental regulation over young people through the application of discourses designed to re-moralise the lifestyles and behaviour of what is viewed as a 'problem group'. Furthermore, the idea of teaching citizenship within the school context gives rise to further tensions surrounding the well-documented social control function exercised by schools. The possibility of encouraging democratic and participatory citizenship within institutional contexts often characterised by discipline, hierarchy and authority is a considerable challenge and is potentially fraught with difficulties.

Nevertheless, in a culture of political uncertainty about citizenship, the ambiguities and tensions in proposals on citizenship education become important. As Crick himself notes:

For all the absolutist rhetoric, in reality at least a degree of confusion reigns. Only the two extreme positions of All-State and All-Market are untenable. There is a lot of space between for active and inclusive citizenship. (2000, p. 225)

Thus, according to Crick, we must revive and take seriously the ideal of a democratic citizenship and he argues that this finds 'tangible expression in the *Report on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy*' (2000, p. 226). This is particularly evidenced in the Report's stress on diversity and plurality. A common citizenship must be secure enough to 'find a place for the plurality of nations, cultures, ethnic identities and religions long found in the United Kingdom' (QCA, 1998, p. 17). Furthermore, citizenship education should address controversial issues that 'commonly divide society and for which significant groups offer conflicting explanations and solutions' (*ibid*). There is a strong expectation that pupils are to develop critical and communicative skills in order to enable their active participation in diverse and contested political arenas. Despite their limitations, dimensions of the proposals on citizenship education point to spaces within which democratic citizenship practices may be embedded.

## **Citizenship and community based learning in higher education**

While citizenship education has been developed primarily for schools, the Crick Report recognises its importance post-16. Clearly higher education has an important role to play in the development of citizenship education and this relates to its longstanding role as a civilising force within complex industrial societies. The expansion of higher education raises questions about how this role is to be carried forward in the twenty-first century. This is a major challenge. The intensification of discipline specialisation and the competition for resources has threatened the ideal of the academy as an inclusive civic community. Furthermore, the incorporation of a business and consumerist model into higher education has reinforced the notion that civil relationships are primarily contractual. In such an environment, how can graduates be prepared for citizenship and, potentially, a leadership role in civil society?

One way this can be achieved is through the establishment of academic programmes that also incorporate forms of community based learning. The Dearing Report into higher education highlighted the importance of work in community and voluntary organisations for undergraduate students (NCIHE, 1997). Many higher education institutions in the UK now offer their students opportunities to become involved in various kinds of community and voluntary work through initiatives such as mentoring. However, if such initiatives are to become part of a broad based citizenship education within higher education, they must help to cultivate skills of critical thinking and social and political analysis. In this sense, citizenship education is a combination of academic skills combined with the actual experience of active citizenship.

### **‘Teaching Citizenship’: a higher education citizenship project**

The purpose of the Teaching Citizenship project at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (BCUC) was to provide opportunities for undergraduate social science students to become involved in the delivery and development of citizenship education. In particular, the project was to support the development of sociology-based programmes in new directions and was supported by the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics. It was envisaged that students would develop critical and analytical skills through supporting and reflecting upon the delivery of citizenship in schools. A placement module was developed for undergraduate social science students to contribute to the development and delivery of citizenship education in two local schools. Although, the module was entitled ‘Teaching Citizenship’, the students increasingly saw their role as quite distinct from the traditional role of teacher and considered themselves to be part of a shared learning experience.

The module began with two weeks of lectures and seminars for the students. They were provided with a range of materials on citizenship education and introductory lectures. They were encouraged to develop a critical approach to citizenship education and to evaluate and assess the application of different strategies for teaching citizenship within schools. There was considerable seminar debate over the possibilities and limitations of citizenship education. At this stage, some students were noticeably pessimistic about

what they thought citizenship education could achieve, while others were more focused on what could practically be done within the constraints of the school system.

The students were organised into two groups of five and asked to come up with activities to take into the two local schools that could be part of the citizenship curriculum in those schools. Both schools served disadvantaged communities and the project was seen as contributing to the widening participation agenda for the area. The schools have been enthusiastic about the project and particularly about involving undergraduates in developing their citizenship curriculum. For one school, the project was an opportunity to support the work of their School Council and this was to provide a focus for the activities of one of the groups.

Prior to the teaching sessions an open workshop session was held in which the students had the opportunity to discuss their activities with representatives from the schools and staff from BCUC. This session provided them with background about the types of schools they would visit and the pupils they would be working with and provided them with feedback on their planned activities. As part of the assessment, the students were asked to write up their reflections and experiences of the teaching sessions. It was expected that the diary would be a reflective account upon the group and individual contribution in relation to the process and delivery of the citizenship classes. The second part of the assessment was an essay critically examining the contribution that citizenship education can make to a democratic society.

## **Discussion**

The project aimed to bring together different groups of learners though shared involvement in citizenship educational work. Both groups set out to help the pupils to develop citizenship skills. As a consequence of having five group members present in the classroom, they have been able to carry out quite focused small group work. Each group member encouraged and supported pupils in developing and voicing their ideas. They have tackled controversial subjects, with both groups having debates on racism. The group working with the School Council focused on moving the pupils towards an action plan with the emphasis on narrowing down an area of concern through debates. The other group worked with sixth formers and focused on developing thinking and debating skills. They designed and delivered a sessions aimed to challenge the pupils' perspectives on the world. They called their sessions 'Tooling for Citizenship' and used games and activities to open up the pupils to some of the complexities of social rules and identities.

The students reported working well with the pupils and have formed very good relationships with them. This has been confirmed by the teachers within the schools, who have been very positive about the progress of the project. The students increasingly saw their role as facilitating open dialogue and critical thinking amongst their groups. Both groups of students drew on a range of political and sociological theories relevant to citizenship education and applied them to their own practice in the classroom. They commented that their commitment to democratic participation and allowing the students to 'have their say' met with a very positive response. The extent to which this has been

achieved has clearly been a source of satisfaction for the groups. The groups came away from the sessions feeling that they had made a real difference to the pupils and that they had witnessed a marked development in the pupils' critical thinking skills. The idea that active citizenship requires critical thinking became important to both groups. One of the students working with the School Council wrote:

In our debate on racism we really began to see the pupils develop their debating and thinking abilities. Some of the students derided the idea as something that could not be stopped, racism they argued has been around for so long and was so ingrained in society that its dissolution through a campaign run by the student council [was impossible]. Yet just as quickly this point was amended through the argument which noted that it might be able to aid those that are feeling the effects of racism, and could also inform some [others] in ways that might have them reconsider their bigoted ways. An analysis of the argument made a strong point of contradiction and respect given to the other debaters. This made for a very interesting and informing debate that led to what the School Council decided was a more meaningful task.

The development in the pupils' critical thinking skills was evident in their evaluation of 'Tooling for Citizenship' sessions:

I think differently now. There's more than one side to a story and there are rules in life.

I've learnt that rules are very complex.

Always listen to both sides of any argument before judging for yourself.

I've learnt to value things and stand up for what you want.

There have been important benefits for the undergraduate students. Some found the project personally very challenging and were initially quite anxious about the teaching sessions. However, what was notable was the increased confidence of the students during the course of the project. One student commented that 'It's been a challenging experience and I now feel more confident about working with young people.'

The students reflected on their role within their groups and evaluated each other's strengths and weaknesses. They also identified practical examples of the constraints imposed on delivering citizenship education within schools. Both groups became aware of a cultural divide between teachers and pupils that they felt made it very difficult for a genuine 'pupil voice' to be expressed. There was an appreciation of the extent to which schools have a social control function that may be in tension with elements of what citizenship education is attempting to achieve.

So far the students have demonstrated a good degree of reflection on both the process of undertaking this kind of project and the sessions themselves. It is hoped that this will be

demonstrated in both the personal diaries and the essay. As a group of students, they have also appreciated doing something outside of the traditional model of higher education. As another student said 'A very enjoyable experience, it makes a change to do something practical and personally rewarding.'

Overall, what is particularly noticeable is the extent to which the BCUC students have valued the relationships with the pupils and that they feel they have made an important contribution to their citizenship learning. They showed a considerable amount of commitment to the project and, in some respects, engaged in processes of evaluation and reflection that went beyond what was required by the formal assessment.

## Conclusion

It is hoped that the completed project will provide a model for both delivering citizenship education in schools and for incorporating citizenship into the undergraduate social science programme. In a number of respects the project is illustrative of good citizenship work. It has been socially inclusive, building new relationships between undergraduate students and children from deprived and marginalised communities. There is evidence that the pupils in the schools have learnt specific 'citizenship skills' such as debating and critical thinking. The sessions have clearly allowed a space for forms of pupil participation to take place that may not have been possible or desirable within other areas of the curriculum. For the undergraduate students, their understanding of the role of citizenship education in a democratic society has certainly been enriched through a very 'hands on' experience of active citizenship. In summary, there is room for a degree of optimism about the capacity of such projects to provide a sound educational basis for citizenship learning to take place.

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