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Experiential learning in civic education

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Introduction

The core question issue of this paper is what we can do, as civic educators, to better prepare our students sustainably for their roles as enlightened and autonomous citizens, able and willing to participate in a humane and democratic society. This issue is not anew, but considering recent social and political developments, which impede rather than facilitate the improvement of a humane and democratic society, as well as the effects of civic education, it is urgent that this be at the top of the civic education agenda. To put it in simple terms: the process of de-civilisation has to be met by vigorous efforts of re-civilisation, a core element of which is civic education.

De- and re-civilisation

Some of the findings of social and political science analyses and discourses which support my perception of increasing de-civilisation are :

- the discourse on 'the society at risk' (Beck 1986), which identifies non-reversible developments of modernisation that threaten human beings, animals and plants more than any former 'dangers';
- western societies seem to 'individualise': people enjoy new liberties as a consequence of the falling apart of traditional structures and milieus; but people are also – and in competition with others – forced to construct their biographies by themselves;
- the process of 'globalisation' de-borders politics, especially the possibilities of democratic control of political processes;
- the various phenomena of what Barber called 'thin democracy': political apathy of increasing numbers of people, arrogance of power as a more or less normal attitude of the political class, de-civilisation of liberal societies etc.;
- an increasing 'symbolisation of politics', reinforced by the tremendous growth of new types of mass media, is preventing people from developing their ability as autonomous citizens to judge objectively;
- finally we have to take into consideration three major political events and developments which impact greatly on social and political conditions:
  - with the breakdown of eastern European socialism and the end of Cold War, western democratic systems have to prove their legitimacy with reference to themselves. The citizens of the western democracies have to be convinced of democratic values as such;
  - the process of European integration is an enormous challenge for European citizens, who have to match their regional and national identities with a new European identity;

° since September 11 the conditions for the development of democracy have changed dramatically. The 'good weather conditions' for democracies seem to have ended. Now we have to find out whether or not our democracies will also be bad weather-proof systems.

This very superficial summary of recent social and political developments and phenomena is likely to mean that people become the object of, rather than subject to, processes which are neither transparent nor controllable. This dramatically deteriorates the conditions of democratic socialisation, with the most probable result that the process of democratisation and civilisation will be impeded rather than facilitated (as evidenced by numerous findings of national and cross-national surveys on political socialisation). At the same time these findings underline the urgent need for democratic citizenship.

In order to develop a humane and democratic society it is necessary to reclaim citizens as 'acting subjects'. The success of efforts to reinvent citizenship will depend on how far (and how many) people "are able to act as citizens and experience their ability to be citizens" (Schmidt, 1995: 576).

If – according to political science 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 support this assumption. They ought to offer learning strategies that are oriented towards the notion of "action as experiential learning" (Wöll, 1998: 122). "By offering youth meaningful participatory experiences, we allow them to discover their potency, access their responsibility, acquire a sense of political processes, and commit to a moral-ethical ideology" (Youniss *et al.*, 1997: 629).

Experiential learning processes will particularly unfold in the course of the (inter)active dealing of the individual(s) with the authentic political and social problems and processes that surround and concern them. This includes reflection and cooperation. Experience-oriented civic education should be subject-oriented, action-oriented, problem-oriented, authentic and political.

Experiential civic learning

I now look more closely at the essentials of the experience- and policy-oriented learning processes mentioned above.

Subject-orientation[1]

Education - in particular civic education - can be understood as self-determination, as development of the subject. Students have to be recognised as learning subjects. Learning subjects are not 'objects' to be taught but to a great extent control their learning processes themselves.

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[1] The term 'subject' in this context does not refer to subject disciplines taught in the classroom. It is rather to be understood as synonymous with 'individual', and in so far antonymous to the term 'object'.

Many studies indicate that sustainable effects can be attributed to subject-oriented or self-controlled active learning. Moreover, subject-oriented learning processes are essential for a civic education that is interested in developing the orientations and competencies which allow young people to be active subjects of participatory democracy. In view of the current social processes of disintegration and individualisation, greater importance is attached to subject-oriented learning by acting, because these ambivalent processes make higher demands on young people. This is particularly so for their ability to form their identities.

Schools and, in particular, civic education need to be focussed on these changed conditions of socialisation and to use the new opportunities for actively shaping identity. While doing this, they must consider that civic education should not aim at the self-referential subject *per se*, at selfishness, but at the unity of individual self-determination and joint co-determination. Subject-orientation implies the option of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning through (inter) acting becomes an integral part of self-oriented learning, when the subjects understand it as a real option, in which the use and structure is controlled either by the learning subject or by the learning group.

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, in Kaiser 1996: 13). So active practical doing seems to play the decisive role in the growth of consciousness and identity. Action-oriented learning, by forming cognition and consciousness, implies a reflective moment. It is bound to the subject's cognitive activities (reflective actions). Action-orientation should not be confused with permanent action and over-stimulation by a show-master-like teacher. Reflective action-orientation means both a reference back to the conditions initiating action, and a "systematic and careful analysis of the relations between actions and their consequences" (Dewey 1993: 202).

The more acting is practised comprehensively, the more that the pedagogical potential of action-oriented learning in civic education should unfold. That is, politically relevant action ought to "be discussed and practised not only with respect to the *goal*, but also in view of the *process*" (Koopmann 1996: 22) of civic education practice. Early participation provides "experience with normative civic practices and ideologies, and shapes youth's emerging identities in a long-lasting form" (Youniss *et al.*, 1997: 629). In fact this positive correlation between the experience of socially and politically relevant engagement within a participatory climate in the classroom and on greater civic competence to participate is one of the major findings of the IEA-study (Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001: 10).

Problem-orientation

Experience-oriented learning that supports the interaction of learners with their environments clearly receives its decisive educational thrust from specific situations stimulating 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: 17). And dilemmas or problems call for solutions.

This basic idea of problem-orientation, outlined by Dewey almost nine decades ago, has led to various strategies of problem-solving learning. One of the most prominent of these approaches is the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) model first proposed by Isaksen and

Treffinger in the mid-1980s, which has been under continuous development since. This model (Isaksen et al., 1994: 58) consists of three components of activity as well as six stages (Figure 1).

Another widely spread variant of problem-solving learning is community-oriented and at the same time classroom-linked service-learning which deals with "learning by strategic community problem-solving and real world reflective doing" (Harkavy, 1996: 66). This approach aims at the investigation of authentic public problems in the environments of schools and a contribution to their (political) solutions.

Figure 1 "Creative Problem-Solving Three Main Components and Six Specific Stages"
(after Isaksen, Dorval, Treffinger, 1994: 58)

Understanding the problem

Divergence

| **Mess finding** | D: | Seeking opportunities for problem-solving |
| | C: | Establishing a broad, general goal for problem-solving |

Convergence

| **Data finding** | D: | Examining many details, looking at the mess from many viewpoints |
| | C: | Determining the most important data to guide problem development |

| **Problem finding** | D: | Considering many possible problem statements |
| | C: | Constructing or selecting a specific problem statement (stating the challenge) |

Generating ideas

| **Idea finding** | D: | Producing many, varied and unusual ideas |
| | C: | Identifying promising possibilities, alternatives or options having interesting potential |

Planning for action

| **Solution finding** | D: | Developing criteria for analysing and refining promising possibilities |
| | C: | Choosing criteria, and applying them to select, strengthen and support promising solutions |

| **Acceptance finding** | D: | Considering possible sources of assistance/resistance and possible actions for implementation |
| | C: | formulating a specific plan of action |

Authenticity

The objects, situations and processes of learning by acting are authentic if they are original, not yet decided, but open-ended. The students' action may have real consequences, for themselves and for the public.

The notion of authenticity cannot be isolated to the classroom or the school: it must relate to the entirety of the students' experiences inside and outside schools. What matters is the use of both areas in an integrated way when choosing projects. This presupposes the readiness of schools to open up. In this context, conceptual variants of education-based community service have been discussed and are increasingly practised in the USA since the early 1990s (also in the context of discourses on communitarianism). The central idea is that learners "become involved in authentic inquiry in areas of genuine interest" (Sewell & St.George, 1997: 139) and while actively taking part in authentic problem-solving apply "skills and habits of behaviour that enable them to be constructively engaged in political and civic life" (Patrick, 1999: 51). Education-based and community-based projects may be considered as "public laboratories, in which citizens learn democracy by doing it" (Patrick, 1999: 51).

Policy-orientation

This concept of civic education is aimed at saving politics from increasing marginalisation and at supporting political subjects as enlightened and active citizens. This approach must ensure that the learner is not restricted to charity and social matters. This particularly applies to education-based community service programmes. This necessary insistence on *political* civic education must not be misunderstood as insisting on teaching politics as a narrow political science-oriented discipline. The ability to realise social problems and develop adequate political solutions requires the overcoming of a discipline-related, narrow approach to politics and integrating a subject-oriented dimension into the conception of politics. Such a broader understanding of politics would mean identifying public policy issues in everyday life.

The outline of these five essentials of experiential civic education supports my core thesis: experience-oriented learning processes, aimed at the sustainable acquisition of competencies which are relevant in politics and civil society, will particularly unfold in the course of the (inter)active dealing of the individual(s) with the authentic political and social problems and processes that surround and concern them. This also includes reflection and co-operation. It represents the complex experience-oriented requirements of civic education.

Experiential learning

The pedagogical organisation and practical realisation of an experience-oriented perspective of civic education demands appropriate ways of learning. These would include the essentials outlined above.

Figure 2 "The Experiential Learning Model"
(after Kolb, in Chickering 1977:18)
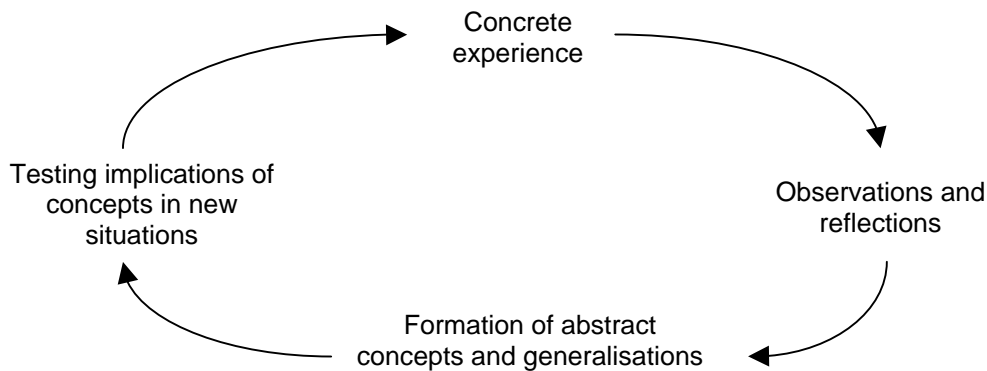
In the 1920s, and to a greater extent in the 1960s and 1970s, American educators and psychologists developed models of the phases and steps of experiential learning. They substantially draw on the work of John Dewey. One of the most widespread models was developed by David Kolb (Figure 2).

According to this model, efficient experiential learning consists of

> four ingredients that themselves call for four different abilities. The learners must be able to enter new experiences openly and fully without bias; they must be able to stand back from those experiences, observe them with some detachment, and reflect on their significance; they must be able to develop a logic, a theory, a conceptual framework that gives some order to the observations; and they must be able to use those concepts to make decisions, to solve problems, to take action (Chickering, 1977: 18).

'Projekt: Aktive Bürger'

One example of how to practice an experiential learning strategy in the context of civic education is demonstrated by the program 'Projekt: Aktive Bürger' (CCE & Koopmann, 2001). This program is the German adaptation of **'**We the People ... Project Citizen' (CCE, 1995) designed by the American Center for Civic Education (CCE). This program for middle school students actively engages 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 study.
3. The students gather and evaluate information about the problem from a variety of sources.
4. Students examine possible solutions and alternative policies being suggested by political institutions, by groups of people, non-governmental institutions etc.

5. The class develops a public policy to solve the problem.
6. Students develop a plan of action to show how they might influence the political institutions, governmental agencies, public administration etc. to adopt their proposed public policy.
7. Students develop a portfolio displaying the essential steps taken during the active learning process. They do this in four different groups:
   - ° Group 1 presents and explains the problem
   - ° Group 2 presents the various policies for dealing with the problem already proposed
   - ° Group 3 presents the political strategy decided on by the students
   - ° Group 4 outlines the action plan the class has developed.
8. The students present the class's portfolio in a simulated legislative hearing, demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of how public policy is formulated.
9. The class actively participates in the political process dealing with the problem by liaising with the political institutions and the public administration implementing the solution the class has worked out.
10. Finally the class reflects on their learning experience.

The original **'**We the People ... Project Citizen' and our German adaptation 'Projekt: Aktive Bürger' combine core-elements of experiential civic learning: students are learning by (inter)acting, by cooperating and reflecting in the context of an authentic policy process dealing with an authentic public problem.

Conclusion

Experiential learning seems to be an appropriate means of meeting the challenges of political and social trends of de-civilisation, because this learning strategy offers young people the possibility of acting as citizens and experiencing their ability to *be* citizens. It seems obvious that the effects and the sustainability of experiential learning will be particularly enhanced in the course of an (inter)active, co-operative and reflective association of individuals with authentic political and social problems, and with decision-making processes which are meaningful to them within their public environment.

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