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Teaching citizenship through the geography curriculum and active learning

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Introduction

There has been constant and concurrent battle and harmony between nature and society throughout human history. The discipline of geography reminds us of the disharmony, focusing on problems and conflicts of interest among different users of space. It researches the possible directions for future developments of a region and of the Earth as a whole, so that developments may be as effective for the present generation as they will be in the future.

Geography employs interdisciplinary co-operation between the natural and social sciences in its research. This mutual recognition between the two sciences can be valuable in the management and direction of development at the local, national and global level, and in transferring these to the field of education. Future civic managers must be prepared for their difficult and responsible task from their school days if they are to be able to evaluate and reconcile different interests in the decision-making process.

Our basic research question was what types of knowledge and skills students should obtain in their geography lessons to enable them, as adults, to make decisions that would benefit people and nature. We examined the possibilities offered by the school curriculum in geography: in a student seminar a simulation of building a new dumping ground in the local environment combined geographical and ecological matters with the objectives of citizenship education.

Adaptation of the geography curriculum for the development of citizenship education

The personal qualities and individual characteristics that affect young people's ideas, notions, and evaluations of their own living space are: the influence of parents, relatives, schoolfellows and friends as primary groups and reference groups; school or teaching practices as a source of knowledge; and the mass media, the social system and wider social community in creating a social system and locating human activity (Catling 1976, Licht *et al* 1991, Kolenc-Kolnik 2004).

This article analyses the geography curriculum used in primary and secondary education, examining teaching goals, didactic principles and teaching strategies that further the acquisition of knowledge and skills for geographical and citizenship education. We wanted geography students who would be future teachers to have a learning experience that would motivate them to plan and use creative ways of teaching.

Lesson content of geography with citizenship education

From the guidelines set out by the Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union (1992) we chose lesson content that was directly or indirectly connected with geographical education and citizenship education. Geographical research and study is concerned with the relationship between man and the environment and their spatial interaction. The contents and scheme of geographical

education is often based on a regional geographical approach: the choice of regions should consider the pupils' interests and current events, and should involve local and global aspects. A further criterion is the principle of diversity: the choice should offer contrasts, of physical environment, human activities, cultures, socio-economic systems and levels of development and survival. The choice should also reflect research about the public, professional and private lives of people, so pupils recognise and take responsibility for their actions as responsible citizens in a local and global context (IGU, 1992).

The contribution of geography to the education of young people should be based on three sets of goals, which include items that add knowledge, skills and values to citizenship education.

1. goals of knowledge and understanding (cognitive goals): understanding socio-economic systems (agriculture, settlement, traffic, industry, commerce, energy, population etc.) in a spatial context. This includes the effects of natural conditions on human activities, the ways environments are shaped by cultural values, religion, technical, economic and political systems, the challenges and possibilities of global interdependence.
2. goals of skills (development of skills and procedural knowledge): communicative, thinking, practical and social skills to research geographical topics at local and international level. Students need to identify questions and results, to choose and structure information, to process, interpret and evaluate data, to generalise and use generalisations to form opinions and assessments, to solve problems, to co-operate in work groups, to make decisions, and to act in accordance with established values.
3. educational goals (development of values and relationships): an evaluation of the beauty of the physical world and its different living conditions, care about environmental quality and planning, concern for the life of future generations. These goals contribute to understanding relationships and values in decision-making, the implementation of geographical knowledge and skills in personal, professional and public life, respect for all people's rights and equality, and the solution of local, regional, national and international issues, according to the principles of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. (IGU, 1992)

The choice of teaching methods and teaching aids

Information about the environment is obtained through all the senses: there is no environmental information through one sense organ alone. In some cases individual senses are prevalent, but perceptions, notions and cognitions are complex. The answer is to combine teaching methods and modes. Preference is given to direct teaching methods, based on practical measurement (field work, excursions), directed to space as a whole (Foskett, 2000, Kolenc-Kolnik, 2004). They have to be seen as the starting point, to be – once the notion of the home place has been obtained – upgraded with indirect teaching methods (handling texts, statistical data, cartographic material and the like), enabling students to generalise, abstract the notions of space and to progress from the known to the unknown.

Contemporary concepts of education emphasise that teaching not only transfers some ready-made knowledge to students, but also trains them for the independent acquisition of knowledge and skills (posing questions, doing research, solving problems and using

sources). Teaching goals are not the end of a path, but open a path which students have to walk themselves. Students are motivated in this by their teachers and guided through various methods of learning. For example: teachers give students instructions for some observation assignment and determine the time and way of doing the work.

In this way students learn authentically, for life, and acquire knowledge to approach problems and solve them successfully. The problems remain in context and therefore preserve all their complexity. As a rule they do not demand only one correct answer, but various interpretations and explanations (Geography Syllabus in Primary and Secondary School, Board of Education, 1998).

Learning is a process by which students gradually attain content knowledge, procedures and methods of learning, gathering experience and acquainting themselves with the utility of the acquired knowledge. Students learn to think in a way that enables them to pose questions, look for sources of information, and make use of methodological procedures that will help them to form new conceptions. We must enable them to obtain declarative as well as procedural knowledge: together, these two represent an inseparable whole.

Active learning: how to choose a location for constructing a new dumping ground

‘Citizenship education and the formation of identity is a lifetime process and continuing learning, involving total development of whole person, not a finished product or outcome of curriculum, for a given time or location’ (Quisumbing, 2002, p10). This statement provides us with a starting point for educational planning and implementation, and for understanding and deciding upon those activities which effect education, as well as our social capacity to live in local, regional, national and global spaces.

In the student geography seminar we wanted to find new learning possibilities for the interdisciplinary connection of teaching goals and lesson content in the fields of citizenship education, geography and ecology. We chose an interdisciplinary topic and used role-play as a teaching method to simulate an event (decision-making) and place (home place, local place), enabling participants to engage in active learning. Students performed a double role: in one part they played the role of geography teachers (in the 1st and 4th stage of the methodical procedure), in the other part they played the role of learners (in the 2nd and 3rd stages). The whole procedure was carried out as follows:

1. Expert theoretical preparation included a choice of lesson content and teaching goals that allowed a comparison with real life and interdisciplinary correlation. Four work groups of four students were formed: each group analysed different curricula (relating their study to geography) in primary and secondary school. Judging the pros and cons, they decided to focus on the curricula for students aged 12 to 15. They then analysed the teaching goals and lesson content for interdisciplinary correlation and presented suggestions, shown in the table below.
2. In the second stage each group formed an idea (ie the titles of their role plays) based on the teaching goals and lesson content from Table 1. They formed a work plan which had to foresee: the motivation of students, division of roles and delegation of tasks to students, conditions for the learning process, duration of the simulation, presenting the results, and evaluation of the work done.

Table 1: Teaching goals and lesson content for the chosen interdisciplinary correlation: the suitability of chosen location for constructing a new dumping ground

School subject	Lesson contents	Teaching goals
Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● physical geographical characteristics of local environments (relief, vegetation, geological formation, waters, climate) and social geographical characteristics (population size and density, communications and infrastructure, economic activities, standard of living, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● understanding of interaction and action with an awareness of cause and effect regarding natural and social geographical components of space as a starting point for the determination of the suitability or unsuitability of land use (i.e. the choice of a certain location for the dumping ground) ● understanding the consequence of today's actions for the future
Environmental education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the quality of the local environment (air, water, soil and vegetation) the quality of the local waste as a potential source of environmental pollution (the type of waste, possibilities for recycling) ● 'ecological tracks' of waste; do we really have to give up comfort for the sake of our environment? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● understanding how our way of life and life habits (production of different goods, consumerism, dumping of waste, recycling of waste as 'ecological tracks') influence the environment
Citizenship education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● individual roles in decision-making processes ● informal and formal work in communities ● social norms, duties and rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● understanding the interaction of aspects (ecological, economic, social, ...) and that problems arise and have to be solved (e.g. the use of space) ● becoming acquainted with conflicting interests that arise in society, and developing autonomous and critical judgement skills ● developing different strategies for the influence of individuals and peer groups on actions and decision-making processes in a democratic society (active gathering of information, arguing, negotiating, etc.)

Source: Curriculum: Geography, Researching the home place and protecting its environment I,II,II, Citizenship culture; all in 9-year primary school; 'ZRSS' (National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia); 1998-2001

3. In the third stage groups presented their work in a limited time, though without any technical or spatial limit. The emphasis was the argument of the idea, and the creativity in presenting the results. Each group had to choose a striking title for its simulation: those chosen reflect versatile teaching approaches:
 - In a dirty environment our thoughts cannot be clean.
 - Dumping ground: ecological despair or economical prospect?
 - Where should the garbage go in Maribor?
 - Dumping ground – *Pro et Contra*
 - Filthy environment = or ≠ filthy thoughts
 - The ecological path from raw material to waste
 - Me a swine? Absolutely not!
 - From heaven to hell and back.
4. In the fourth stage groups assessed each other on three criteria: quality (consistency of methodology) of planning the role play, originality of the idea and creativity in the presentation. Their grading had to be justified.

The results of the whole seminar, which lasted three weeks or six hours in a lecture room, were seen as a good learning experience by all the participants. Two seminar groups of students co-operated, each divided into four smaller groups of four participants. The students assessed the significance of such work for acquiring pedagogic experience. Out of 32 participants, 29 found this kind of schoolwork ‘very suitable’, three marked it as ‘suitable’; no student marked it as ‘unsuitable’. They justified these decisions as follows: this kind of work requires a lot of preparation on the part of the teacher and a clear vision of goals, the students had to be highly motivated, there was uncertainty as to whether or not less motivated students would be encouraged, and where needed external co-workers could be found.

Conclusion

Contemporary concepts of education emphasise that teaching not only transfers ready-made knowledge to students, but also trains them for the independent acquisition of knowledge and skills (posing questions, doing research, solving problems, and using sources). They emphasise that teaching goals are not the end of a path, but open a path which students have to walk. We enable students to learn authentically, for life, to acquire knowledge to approach problems and to solve them successfully. The problems remain in their real context and can preserve their complexity. As a rule they do not demand only one correct answer, but various interpretations and explanations.

We found the geography curriculum enables us to reach numerous goals of citizenship education, and confirms the benefits of connecting the natural and social sciences. In our example of role play we wanted to make the geography students – future teachers – open their minds to search for useful solutions in a wider context and to consciously integrate the knowledge and skills of different school subjects in an interactive way.

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