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

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Human flourishing in contested space: citizenship studies *ab initio*

Eilís Ward

Department of Sociology and Politics, NUI Galway (Ireland)

Introduction

Current reform of the Irish senior cycle education system (post compulsory school age education) has opened the possibility for the development of wholly new subject areas. One such area is that of social and political education. This paper is derived from a curriculum framework proposal entitled 'Citizenship Studies' which has been presented by a national independent curriculum body, the Curriculum Development Unit (Dublin). It was my task, as a consultant with a background in both academic social sciences and in civic education projects, to develop a framework through a consultative and deliberative process. What emerged (Ward 2002) was a somewhat distinct subject area that is neither a customary Politics, Sociology or Philosophy curriculum nor an approach that could be considered a form of citizenship education, although it locates the idea of citizenship at its heart. As yet, no decision has been made by the national curriculum body (the National Council for Curriculum Assessment) as to what, if any, curriculum will be provided.

This paper serves two purposes. First, to present the framework as a contribution to wider debate on citizenship education here. I will be arguing for the centring of ideas about human flourishing and democratic deliberation¹ and against the adoption of a functional standpoint in relation to education about citizenship as best fitting the democratic and multi-cultural states which reflect our reality today. I would like to suggest that a commitment to democracy must translate into a commitment to core democratic principles in the classroom, particularly a classroom which is learning about citizenship. This means accepting the moral agency of the student. I do not wish to extend these remarks to citizenship education for younger students (below compulsory school-age) as I believe different ethical issues arise here to do with the moral development of the child and the role of the school in socialising its very young citizens. Second, I would like to use this paper as an opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges of developing such a curriculum. As all participants here know, any form of values education is characterised by contestation bounded by deep-seated ideological differences towards, for example, the role and nature of the state and the role of faith-based morality or ethics in public life.

Some contexts

There are two overarching themes related to the changing nature of Irish society which are relevant here. First is the loss of control over the school system (primary and

¹ Democratic deliberation is a notion that dialogue constitutes a core value in modern democracies and that political legitimacy and political decisions require a deliberative process – particularly in plurality and multi-ethnic, multi-cultural states. We draw our ideas from, amongst others, the work of political philosophers, Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, Sayla Benhabib, from educationalist John Dewey and from contemporary commentaries within political philosophy on the requirements for collective life and civic society in such states.

secondary level) held traditionally by the Catholic church. While publicly funded, the education system was effectively, privatised into the hands of the church. This situation remained virtually unchanged until the end of the twentieth century and while few schools today are controlled directly by the clergy, they still espouse a Catholic ethos in relation to the broad values within which the education system is located. Ireland remains, culturally, a Catholic state although the power of the church has been significantly diminished in all areas of life.

A second is the globalisation of the Irish economy. Ireland has one of the fastest growing economies in Europe. One dimension of this has been the flow of migrants inwards to Ireland – reversing the trend of decades when Ireland was a country of out-migration. These new groups, along with flows of asylum seekers, are rendering Ireland a place of multiple languages, ethnicities and religions and in Irish schools this is now reflected in the identity of the student population.

Finally, an additional context relates to what form of citizenship education exists within the second level system. Outside of the infusion of generic ‘citizenship’ values a compulsory subject area entitled ‘Civil Social and Political Education (CSPE)’ exists in the junior cycle (12-15 year olds). However good its content the subject suffers from low status in the schools. One contributing factor has been the lack of follow-on into the senior cycle: it is not therefore a subject with credit potential in terms of the final state exam (typically held at age 18) or for access into third level educational institutions. Hence we developed our proposal as a follow- on, but distinct from, CSPE.

The proposal ‘Citizenship Studies’

This paper does not comprehensively present the framework proposal for ‘Citizenship Studies’. For instance it only briefly refers to issues of teacher training and assessment. I have chosen seven themes which capture some key issues of philosophical and pedagogical importance in the evolution of that framework. We worked from the position that a new curriculum area first of all required a solid, coherent and robust analytical and pedagogical framework from which to grow.

Citizenship as the terrain of study

This framework places the idea of citizenship itself at the core of the curriculum. It is a study of the practice and politics of citizenship: as lived experience, as theory, as policy. We understand citizenship to be a contested and highly contestable notion. The exact nature of the relationship between the citizen and the democratic state is not subject to universal agreement. We posited it therefore as encapsulating a dynamic tripartite relationship between the individual, the society and the state – each of which is played out at a local, national and international level. This dynamic, we felt, can reflect the reality of the lives of young adults today in modern, democratic, multi-ethnic states in an increasingly globalised world where collective life requires the skills and capacities of deliberation and peaceful conflict resolution.

‘Citizenship Studies’ hence can be embedded in the tradition of civic republicanism and its understanding of the role of civic education. In this view, two points are emphasised: the importance of the need for an awareness of the interdependence of humans and the need for deliberation (Honohan, 2002).

Citizenship as a globalised notion

We argue that an understanding of the notion of citizenship necessarily requires an appreciation of the global dimension, not as ‘add on’ but as integral to the experience of citizenship today.

Citizenship requires a multi-disciplinary approach

We argue that a multi-disciplinary approach is needed to study the notion of citizenship, calling on the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, political science, anthropology and also feminist theory and cultural studies.

Interdependence as a priori

Our framework stresses and builds on an understanding that our lives today are necessarily interdependent (and that this interdependence has a global dimension).

Citizenship is located

We argue that a study of citizenship is best embedded in the actual location where students find themselves – in this case in an Ireland which is a globalised, modern, secularising, democratic state, becoming increasingly multi-ethnic over time and subject to rapid social change.

A thematic approach to content

Following considerable deliberation we proposed a framework curriculum built around what we suggest are four organising principles which determine how the tripartite relationship between the citizen, the state and society is constructed. Other principles or notions (such as ‘power’ and ‘freedom’) are not excluded from consideration. As topics unfold in the development of the curriculum, these will be treated. The four we selected were:

- interdependence
- equality
- justice
- participation.

Each of these concepts is of course related and becomes ‘real’ in a policy or a practice. For example, the concept of justice can become the organising principle around which to develop learning on topics such as the relationship between young people’s alcohol consumption and violent crime. ‘Interdependence’ could present learning on the relationship between ethnic identity and membership of community or on global environmental activism. Each of the four concepts can be linked directly into bodies of

social, sociological, political or philosophical theory and topics and issues can be identified which will reflect the interests and concerns of the average 16-19 year old and, importantly, can be given meaning in a local, national or international context.

Contestation and contemporary life

We argue that all salient issues of contemporary life, including particularly conflicts and challenges to collective living, are amenable to discussion in the 'Citizenship Studies' curriculum and can be used to explore and deliberate these themes. In fact, we argue that such a curriculum must take on the 'hard' topics – it is in their deliberation and resolution that deep learning can be had.

How do we teach 'Citizenship Studies'?

The question here refers less to what the content of such a curriculum would be like (although we have developed sample sections, the curriculum is itself still at the level of an idea) than to pedagogical and methodological questions. In addressing these I hope to show some of our thinking in relation to contestation and to human flourishing. Here I make four points:

1. Following considerable deliberation, we ultimately rejected the idea of developing a normative framework from which to deliver such a curriculum in favour of bring the notion of democratic deliberation to the core. We argue that this notion provides the pedagogical base, a guide for establishing learning outcomes, and can open up new possibilities for assessment. We did this for three reasons:
 - we began from a philosophical position of positing the moral agency of the student
 - we rejected the idea that a curriculum devoted to the study of citizenship in a modern, pluralist state would deny the students some of the rights held by all citizens in that state: viz: the right to hold contrary views; the right to transgress; the right not to be interested in social change (in other words the right to hold conservative views) and the right to express either reactionary or revolutionary views and so on
 - pedagogically we argue in favour of inductive learning over deductive learning and, in this approach posit Citizenship Studies as, inter alia, a study in the epistemology of morality or public ethics. For instance, in relation to human rights we state that deeper learning occurs when students begin with discussing if human rights ought to exist, what they are might be based on, what their significance is, rather than beginning with them as a given and moving outwards to look at, say applicability, contestation about interpretation and so on.
2. We develop the notion of democratic deliberation to provide sets of skills that can be taught, a pedagogy for the classroom and to prompt a form of assessment. For instance if we expect students to learn the skills of deliberation, then they should be assessed on these skills. In relation to democratic deliberation, we suggest that the skills can be learned and would include the range of skills taught in critical thinking courses and also in the skills than can be taught to develop the capacity for moral reasoning (Haydon 2000). The content (such as learning about the electoral system

or what rights asylum seekers have in Ireland) will follow on from the way in which the curriculum is built around the four themes as presented above.

3. Notwithstanding the first point here, democratic deliberation is not value-free. As a way of proceeding in collective life, it contains assumptions such as; it is better to resolve conflict through non-violent means; all human beings have equal worth; emotions are intelligible; dialogue is characterised by reciprocity and so on. However, in its emphasis on process and in its valuing of difference and acceptance of moral contestation, democratic deliberation allows us to avoid the pitfalls of adopting a priori moral values which may not be culturally or ideologically transferable. It allows us avoid having to prescribe a universal 'good life' and to assessing students on their avowal, or otherwise, of those specific moral values.
4. The final point here refers to the important and indeed challenging role of the teacher in a Citizenship Studies classroom. We understood the teacher as having a central role in building the kind of environment within which democratic deliberation can flourish, in protecting the rules of engagement. The teacher therefore supports the curriculum in its integrity as much as its outcome and this requires that the teacher becomes, in the tradition of deliberation, a facilitator of learning rather than a didact. The teacher facilitates the possibility of learning for the student but also of learning at multiple levels. The pedagogy of openness to debate therefore applies as much to the teacher as it does to the student.

It is through adherence to these broad points and in privileging the moral agency of the student in the core of the curriculum that, we suggest, human flourishing can be facilitated in an educational domain that addresses directly issues of deep moral, ethical and cultural values. In this sense the curriculum we are proposing conforms to the idea of 'cultivating humanity' as set out by Canadian philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1997) and what one commentator has called 'humanistic values education' (Darom, 2000). While arguing for moral autonomy it locates that in a world of interdependence which assumes a common humanity (Gaita 1998) and sets out to provide a way of negotiating collective life across and within particularities or differences.

Some challenges and a conclusion

Our proposal for Citizenship Studies contrasts with more traditional approaches to civic education which may stress unity and commonality and some contemporary forms of education for citizenship which prioritise the functional role of education in creating good citizens. In bringing citizenship itself into the core of the curriculum and setting out to explore and learn about it in a contemporary, globalised world, we suggest we can create a public sphere, echoing civic life, within the classroom. However, the classroom is a place apart and particular attention needs to be paid to a number of issues as we move forward in continuing to develop this idea for Citizenship Studies. Below I have identified five challenges which will have to be met as we proceed.

The challenge of moral relativism

Some critical feedback on our proposal so far has raised the danger of producing a morally relativistic classroom and curriculum. While we contest this criticism (as above) there is a contradiction at the heart of the framework which could be perceived as facilitating such relativism. This is the notion that there is no universally agreed 'good

life' and that, therefore, it has to be deliberated. What if students agree to deliberate away the rights to freedom of expression and, say, the notion that conflict is best resolved through peaceful means? This contradiction is, however, at the heart of democracy and pluralism itself and cannot be resolved as such. At the end of the day, we can perhaps ask what model of educational delivery best prepares young people for citizenship today: one which emphasises consensus and unitary values, or, one that is compatible with pluralism itself (Rowe 2000)?

The challenge to fully engage the student

It will be critical that the curriculum ensures real engagement of the students – this means tackling issues that are relevant to their lives and subjecting them to meaningful deliberations. What exercises a sociologist or political scientist or an educational specialist may not translate into engagement for a seventeen or eighteen year old youth.

The challenge to present 'reality'

On my way to the CiCe conference I had a conversation with an Irish sociologist who raised this challenge for me. While we may study how things work and how to engage with the political realm or become involved in community activities, it will be important also to prepare students for the actuality of how power is constructed and held within our society. Institutionalised power and its spokespersons may use the language of citizenship and civil society engagement but in reality may fully resist such engagement. A curriculum therefore must problematise assumptions about reciprocity, reflexivity or openness within the political or cultural elite in any society and equip students with an understanding of the workings of power.

The challenge of who will teach the subject

There are issues here of the professional development and training of a cohort of teachers to take on this subject. But there is also an issue of whether this subject might demand more of a teacher than, say, teaching the maths or English curriculum. This needs to be addressed. If valid, it could also be, notwithstanding, a positive dimension: that only teachers who are really drawn to the subject will take it on.

The challenge of including all students

Given that this curriculum could reward those students who are most articulate, confident and informed, and who come from socio-economic backgrounds where public and civic participation is taken as a norm (i.e. middle class students), it will be important that such a curriculum will not preclude any students because of their socio-economic background, their linguistic ability or degree of personal confidence.

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