



This paper is taken from

*Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship
Proceedings of the twelfth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2010

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-01-0**

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Virta, A. (2010) Assessment of and for active citizenship and lifelong learning, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp. 561 - 568

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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 therein.

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
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Assessment of and for active citizenship and lifelong learning

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Abstract

The article discusses a number of dilemmas and paradoxes related to the assessment of citizenship education and civic education, with special reference to active citizenship and lifelong learning. It also deals with some contradictions in the assessment of the goals and expected outcomes of citizenship education. Finally, assessment of citizenship education is analysed in the framework of some current trends of assessment.

Assessment of and for citizenship education

Assessment can be defined as “the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils’ responses to educational tasks” (Lambert & Lines, 2000, 4). Teachers make judgments about the students’ knowledge and performance, defining at the same time what counts as valuable knowledge, skills, and competences, thus directing the way in which students learn. This is called the backwash effect of assessment and evaluation. External assessments are instrumental also in determining how teachers teach. However, student assessment is not only a form of educational activity confined within the walls of the classroom, but has deep and ongoing implications for any individual student’s identity, and for the society in the long run. Therefore, due to the powerful effects that assessment has on society and on each individual’s opportunities of continuing their studies and on their employment options (for detailed discussion, see Broadfoot, 1996), assessments in any school subject are at least indirectly related to citizenship education. In sum, assessment can be characterised as gate-keeping activity in any society, and taken all the examinations and assessments that students must go through; it can also be seen as a major channel for citizenship construction.

The functions of assessment can be roughly divided into two types, namely *feedout* and *feedback*, which frequently overlap in practice. The traditional form of assessment is summative, concentrating on the feedout function and giving information about student outcome at the end of a programme, a course or a certain period of study in the form of diplomas, certificates and examinations. This type of assessment can be characterised as ‘assessment of learning’, it is inevitable in educational systems and is also used for selection purposes. The other type of assessment, formative assessment, has gained ground as a result of recent changes in the paradigms of research on learning and thinking which have had a major impact on the requirements for reforming school assessments (Pellegrino, Chudowsky & Glaser, 2001; Dierich & Dochy, 2001). Recent educational literature on assessment recommends formative assessments with the purpose of supporting students’ learning and development and with a focus on higher-order cognitive skills (Black, 2000; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003; Irons, 2008). It is the issue of the feedback function of assessment, ‘assessment for

learning', which is embedded in the very processes of studying and teaching (Knight, 2002; Irons, 2008). These different functions or purposes are not totally opposite or mutually exclusive, and a single assessment can be used for more than one purpose. Both functions of assessment are related to society and to the construction of citizenship. While the first mentioned type is more directly used in the selection and labeling processes, the last mentioned function of assessment can be seen as guidance for students to help their navigation in educational systems and thus finding their way in society, and it is also related to lifelong learning as a metacognitive and more interactive way of examining individual capacity and learning.

Although assessment in general is a channel of citizenship education, the focus of this article is, however, more directly on the assessment of citizenship and civic education. In the following, student assessment in civic education and citizenship education is discussed in the framework of validity, relevance and ethic.

Civic education and citizenship education are closely related forms of education: they are largely overlapping and they pursue identical aims, such as active citizenship, democratic values, human rights and critical thinking skills. Especially the concept of active citizenship has become a major goal in contemporary European education, with the purpose of preparing students for democratic participation. There are, however, various interpretations of this basic concept and its key elements (for discussion, see Ross, 2008). In school curricula, the status of civic education as a channel of socialisation to society and its norms is typically more established than that of citizenship education, although the contexts vary considerably between different countries, and there are differences in terminology as well. Civic education can be seen as the core of citizenship education, and it is the forum for dealing with the aims of citizenship education in a condensed form. It is also the very subject with the aim of giving students the necessary knowledge base and tools for thinking and participating in social reality, although it also involves the element of counter-socialization, aiming at critical evaluation of existing circumstances (Ochoa-Becher, 2007).

The role of assessment is somewhat different if it is seen as related to civics as a school subject with its cognitive requirements, or as related to citizenship education and construction of citizenship in general. Both purposes of assessment (of and for learning) are certainly involved in the practical assessment routines in civic education. As to citizenship education, the formative functions of assessment seem to be most relevant with regard to its role in supporting individuals' development into citizenship. This is consistent also with the framework of lifelong learning.

Validity, relevance and ethic of assessment as related to civic and citizenship education

The basic elements of assessment can be summarized in three processes: cognition, observation and interpretation (Pellegrino et al., 2001), i.e. what students know and can do, how they can present what they know and are capable of, how teachers pay attention to it and how they are able to interpret what they observed. This seems simple but there are several risks in the process which undermine the validity and reliability of assessment. A condition for valid assessment is that the students are able to present their

knowledge and skills realistically and that the methods of assessment enable them to do so. Then, to do justice to the students, the teacher has to direct her/his attention to relevant issues and make correct conclusions of the students' achievements.

As to civics, the main question is whether the students have learned such skills as they really need in their present and future lives as citizens and whether the contents of teaching and contents of assessment are relevant, and whether the assessments focus on the relevant parts of the curriculum (Broadfoot, 1996). Assessments can thus be expected to cover comprehensively the essential goals and contents of the curriculum, but there is no consensus about the basic concepts underlying citizenship education, such as citizenship or active citizenship (Ross, 2008). There are also differing understandings of the outcomes that should be reached through citizenship education.

In citizenship education as well as in the civic curriculum, the requirements are so diverse, multifaceted and often idealistic that the available methods of assessment do not cover them all but often only those which are the easiest to assess (Jerome, 2008). The more complicated or demanding the objectives are, the more difficult it is to assess them reliably. The objectives of civic/citizenship education are neither simple to define nor to transform into operational form in which they can be reliably assessed. This is especially true of the objectives which are related to social and moral values and attitudes, such as appreciation of human rights, equality and democracy. Furthermore, the most essential outcomes are visible for a long time after school years and they are thus not accessible for school assessment, while the "easy" targets of assessment may not be relevant for citizenship (Grant & Salinas, 2008; Jerome, 2008; Ross, 2008). The problem may be that assessments live their own lives and the most important goals can be left totally outside of formal assessments. Despite the fluent rhetoric as to educational aims and their general acceptance in principle, there is not very much or very reliable research base convincing that civic education has had long lasting effects on citizens' activity.

For instance, the concept of active citizenship is multifaceted and therefore difficult to assess. It is difficult to define, in terms of active citizenship, what would be reasonable to expect from students at school level. It can also be difficult to develop methods for assessing active citizenship. Would it be participation in activities or work outside of school? Would it be written tasks or more functional activities, or willingness to participate in classroom debates and organized discussions? If the teacher uses various classroom situations and activities as evidence of active citizenship, informal observation is usually possible, but it is open to misunderstandings and memory mistakes. Observations are frequently contaminated with issues which have nothing or very little with the subject matter competence to do, such as students' different temperaments. For an introvert personality it can be difficult to be an overtly active and participating citizen. The teacher perhaps assumes that assessment is focused on subject-related behaviors or motivation, although it may tell more about the student as a person, or his/her parents' way of raising children. It is in principle a major mistake to assess a student's temperament or personality instead of school subject related competence, although for a teacher involved in busy school life, it is perhaps impossible to keep these two separate. However, if the teacher chose to use absolutely reliable items to assess active citizenship, instance multiple choice items, that would then be irrelevant as well.

As to the relevance of assessment, it is crucial to teach and assess content that is worth learning, although it is seldom clear how to determine what is important enough to be learned. According to the behaviouristic paradigm of learning, there may not be difficulties: the basic facts, basic skills that were drilled in teaching were assessed in school tests (Black, 2000). After the cognitive turn, the emphasis has been on higher-order thinking skills and more challenging outcomes in general, but they are more difficult to verify and to assess objectively. This change has also implied increasing demands on students, and the students should be active in constructing their own knowledge (Pellegrino et al., 2001). It is vital that assessment methods take into account the processes of constructing knowledge and critical thinking. A good question is how well assessment covers these higher order processes and a still better one: promotes learning.

It is more difficult to assess consistently the quality of knowledge as opposed to the quantity of knowledge measured as the number of correct answers, for example. There is also the problem of "inert knowledge", i.e. what happens is that students adopt enough information to enable them to pass tests on it, but they cannot use what they have learnt as a basis of argumentation or in practical problem solving, for instance. Each domain, including citizenship education and civics, certainly includes facts that are useful to know, but in most cases it is the application of knowledge that makes it useful and worthwhile. One bias of classroom assessment is that it may be based on a relatively dogmatic view of knowledge, because tests may lead students to adopt information as absolute truths without any idea of alternative interpretations or perspectives. Furthermore, only part of what a person knows can be reliably assessed, and it is highly difficult to examine systematically so-called tacit knowledge, for example. With regard to citizenship education, all these questions can bias assessment, because the 'knowledge base' is open to several perspectives, but school curriculum and assessment often assume only one perspective. Citizenship education also includes dimensions of tacit knowledge, especially in relation to activity and attitudes. A person's values cannot be assessed in an ethical way, and what is called knowledge in the domain of civic education can be made up of 'inert' facts that are not put to action.

The conception of educational outcome is thus highly relative. What is a reasonable time frame for assessment outcomes? In the long run and in terms of relevance for adult life and work, a problem arises, if there is no transfer from the test situation to the life after, and if the outcome of education consists of no more than the pieces of knowledge the person has in his/her mind at the time of the examination. A crucial issue with regard to citizenship is how the citizens function in society and what kind of values they construct in their minds – but these effects can only be assessed long after the civic education lessons; and even then, it may be impossible to track the results of formal education, because clear-cut and convincing causal relations in the field of education are difficult to prove, especially for long-term effects.

Formative assessment and sustainable assessment

Of the required objectives for civic education including attitudes and skills, assessments reach best the cognitive domain, that is, the intellectual requirements, although social relevance is likely to require capacity for cooperation and activity. These competences

are not adequately covered by traditional social studies assessments. Assessment of performance can be far more difficult to approach in subjects such as civics than in expressive subjects such as arts, mother tongue or physical education. Additionally, according to the formative trends in assessment, it is important to study students' growth and development, which also can be difficult to verify.

Given all the complexities of assessments described above, formative assessment can be seen as more beneficial in citizenship education than summative assessment, due to its emphasis on supporting student growth and development. One form of formative assessment (previously known as authentic assessment) involves flexible forms of assessment close to classroom reality, students' life-worlds and relevant for their life in society and especially in future society (Wiggins, 1989, Virta, 1999). The basic requirement is that tasks should require skills which are needed in real situations, such as the ability to discuss, cooperate, acquire information, and to analyze visual and graphic information.

Tasks should resemble the way in which professionals and adults in the field work. Professional activity is based on acquirement of new information instead of repeating what we already know, understanding the problem and creating a coherent view of the problem. Newman (1992) has analysed this concept in relation to social studies and recommends authentic discourse, which is produced by students, targeted towards real audiences and written for real purposes unlike school assignments or exams, which are often produced in stressful test situations and would only be read by the teachers. These authentic discourses might include for instance real letters to editors, motions, applications, plans, diaries, or perhaps blogs, in which students take the roles that adults have in society, or which on a smaller scale resemble the ways in which for instance historians or social scientists write.

There are, however, some theoretical problems in this requirement, for instance how to design the tasks so that students can reliably show their capacity to acquire and use information. If these assignments are used to give marks and compare student assignments, the problem is the diversity of the products. If one of the prerequisites is that the assignments should be authentic and related to students' needs in society, the obvious problem is that it is difficult to predict the students' future needs – as it is, there are enough complications in the present society. The rapid and continuous changes in society make these issues ever more difficult (Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002).

Another recent current in student assessment is called sustainable assessment. Boud (2000) describes it as assessment for the learning society, and it emphasises focussing on the strengths of the students instead of their weaknesses and aims at supporting students' future development as life-long learners. Traditionally, people tend to experience school tests as threats, because tests are so decisive for their future opportunities, but the learning society can no more afford this. Instead, everybody's capacity to learn should be supported, also by means of assessments, which should promote learning and development, not prevent it. Sustainable assessment is based on confidence in the learners' capacity to learn. There is also an emphasis on self-assessment, self-monitoring and peer assessment, and assessing is not (only or mainly) a domain for external assessors. Effective self-assessment requires therefore clarification of criteria and

standards and support to students' capacity to assess and to think critically. This kind of assessment can have the function of empowering the learners to become aware of their possibilities. Sustainable assessment has a double duty combining both formative and summative functions of assessments, but it is not so much an alternative methodology of assessment than a basic attitude towards it. In this sense, sustainable assessment has potential for citizenship education, because assessment involves monitoring the students' development and individual learning needs.

Both of these currents, authentic as well as sustainable assessment, put an emphasis on enhancing the social relevance of assessment. Yet, a vital ethical issue is whose view of society and of good citizenship determines the values and competences which are supported through assessment procedures. Given the rapid changes in society, a gap is growing between what young people really need and what schools are able to give them. Reality is multifaceted, and anticipating future challenges is becoming more and more difficult. Despite the limitations, formative assessment focuses on and also promotes such competences as are closely related to active citizenship, such as cooperation, self-monitoring, participating and critical thinking. In civic and citizenship education, assessment should prepare students to live and participate in their societies. It is therefore not to be separated from teaching and learning, but instead be involved in the attempts at enhancing students' interest in society, politics and current issues, encouraging them to follow the media and to engage themselves in a democratic manner, and to deal with value-laden and moral social issues from more than one perspective.

Conclusions

Assessment is situated in a nexus where different issues are come together. It is about values, conception of knowledge, conception of a good citizen, society, and the key competences, but also about democracy and human dignity – not forgetting the critical skills.

Basically, assessment in any school subject is important for society and for each citizen's growth as a person and as a citizen, because it is to a great deal through school assessments that we create an image of ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, and possibilities (not entirely of course, but they have an influence). Therefore, assessing students performance, giving credits and certificates, is never a technical activity although it might seem so viewed as teachers' everyday work in the classrooms. Therefore, these issues should be understood as an important part of teachers' professional ethics. Because assessments have in all levels of educational systems gained an increasingly greater importance, teachers should be able, independently and collectively, to reflect on why they assess, and they should be conscious of the purposes and functions of their assessments, and the impact of assessments on the individual students.

If assessment as a part of teaching is understood to be involved in the process of socialization, it is crucial to consider into what society and what kind of future assessment is socializing and what are the skills and capacities that are supported by assessments. It is essential what the requirements are and who is setting the standards. It

is also a question of power to determine who has the position to decide about expected outcomes and criteria.

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